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March 4, 2024, Issue 5

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Honoring the 'face of Colorado potatoes'

Why Jim Ehrlich is the 2024 Potato Person of the Year

By Christina Herrick

ASHINGTON — When presented the award as the 2024 Potato Grower of the Year, Jim Ehrlich was speechless — well, almost.

"I'm extremely humbled," he told The Packer, which presented the award Feb. 26 in conjunction with the National Potato Council during the 2024 NPC Washington Summit. "I have been so blessed to work for the potato industry and the wonderful people in the industry. I've made great friends from all across the country. There's nothing more noble than producing food for people to eat."

Potato Person of the Year recognizes an individual who has gone above and beyond the call of duty during the past year to further the potato industry. Award winners have devoted a significant amount of time promoting potatoes to consumers and representing the industry on trade missions and in front of regulatory agencies.

Ehrlich, dubbed the "face of Colorado potatoes," has served as the executive director of the Colorado Potato Administrative Committee for the past 18 years after the late Tom Ford approached him to take over the post. Ehrlich announced his plan to retire this year.

While he plans to step back, Ehrlich said he intends to stay connected to the industry.

"My roots are in agriculture deep," he said. Bob Mattive, NPC's incoming president, said he's known Ehrlich for a long time, having somewhat similar paths to a career with potatoes. Mattive said Ehrlich is a

COLORADO page 5



Christina Herrick, produce editor for The Packer, presented Jim Ehrlich, at left, with the 2024 Potato Person of the Year award at the National Potato Council's 2024 Washington Summit. Outgoing NPC President RJ Andrus, right, thanked Ehrlich for his nearly two decades of service to the potato industry. Photo courtesy of National Potato Council

"People look to [Ehrlich] as a resource if they need to find out something about potatoes in Colorado. Jim is their go-to person."

- Bob Mattive, National Potato Council

Exploring the 'vineyard of the future' project's broader impacts

By Christina Herrick

ohn Deere recently announced a "vineyard of the future" project with Sonoma County Winegrowers to deploy technology solutions to help wine grape growers better maximize yield, applications and more.

In this episode of the "Tip of the Iceberg" podcast, Sean Sundberg, business integra-

tion manager for John Deere, said the team at John Deere recognized the importance of the multigenerational farms in the region. He said these families wanted to participate in the project to help ensure the vineyard lands continue to stay in farming.

"That's really what engaged us to say there's



Scan to listen to this podcast episode.



an opportunity here, that we can help," he said. "The future is now, and those farmers are ... looking for technology and embracing technology."

Sundberg said growers he works with understand how technology can help alleviate the mounting pressures of labor woes, pesticide spray regulations and ris-

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Potato plans

How to attract younger shoppers. page 20

Sunny outlook

Florida growers expecting a productive spring.

page 30

Mexico mango

A look at U.S. imports, retailer tips to boost sales, and more.

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PEOPLE

Pear Bureau president and CEO to depart



Kevin D. Moffitt

Northwest President and CEO Kevin D. Moffitt is set to step down this summer after 35 years with the nonprofit marketing organization. Moffitt will relinguish day-to-day

Pear Bureau

duties as president and CEO as of July 1, however, he will continue in a part-time mentoring and training role until the end of the 2024-25 season to aid the transition of his successor.

Stemilt CEO named Apple Citizen of the Year



West Mathison

The Washington State Apple Blossom Festival named Stemilt Growers President and CEO West Mathison its 2024 Apple Citizen of the Year Award winner. The festival recognizes leaders

in the apple industry who contribute to improving the state's tree fruit industry. During his tenure, Stemilt has expanded its footprint in conventional and organic growing.

Apeel Sciences names new CEO



Luiz Beling

Apeel Sciences, a food system innovation company, has named Luiz Beling as CEO. The Santa Barbara, Calif.-based company said that Beling brings more than two decades of experience in the ag-

riculture industry. He will work with James Rogers, Apeel's founder and outgoing CEO, to transition into the new role. Rogers will remain as a board member.

Bloom Fresh appoints interim CEO



Josep Jove Estiarte

Bloom Fresh International has appointed Chief Innovation Officer Josep Jove Estiarte as interim CEO following the departure of Kenneth Avery, whose six-month tenure as CEO began

with the acquisition of International Fruit Genetics by Amfresh and its merging with SNFL Group. Under Estiarte's leadership, the company says it will continue to lean into innovation, using natural and non-GMO new breeding.

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Save Mart Cos. names chief merchandising, marketing officer The Save Mart



Cos. has appointed Chris Hooks as chief merchandising and marketing officer. Hooks has extensive grocery experience spanning conventional grocery, discount retailing

and private label at companies such as H-E-B, Family Dollar, and Topco. Career highlights include serving as executive vice president and chief merchandising officer at Save A Lot, senior vice president of consumable merchandising at Family Dollar and executive vice president at Topco Associates for Center Store.

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Allen Lund Co. names senior director of carrier development



Matt Minthorn

La Cañada Flintridge, Calif.-based Allen Lund Co. has promoted Matt Minthorn to senior director of carrier development. In the role, Minthorn will focus on the carrier side

of ALC's business, overseeing activities related to carrier relations, compliance, and fraud prevention. Before the promotion, Minthorn served as the general manager of ALC Phoenix for 12 years.

Kwik Lok has new director of business development



Chris Latta

Chris Latta has joined Yakima, Wash.-based Kwik Lok Corp. as its director of business development. Latta, most recently vice president of global sales for Binsfeld Engineering,

has experience with sales, marketing and industrial design. As director of business

development, Latta will be responsible for driving ideation and commercialization of new solutions to market.

FPAA adds produce industry veterans





John Toner

Phil Gruszka

Industry veterans John Toner and Phil Gruszka have joined the Fresh Produce Association of the Americas as business development directors. Toner, currently CEO of Toner Insights, brings experience at the United Fresh Produce Association

and the International Fresh Produce Association, where he was vice president of political affairs. Gruszka has served in roles with Grimmway Farms, among others in the fresh produce

industry, the release said. He founded Gruszka Consulting in 2011, a California-based full-service marketing and sales consultancy focusing on the food and beverage sectors.

Pear Bureau exec elected World **Apple and Pear Association chair**



Jeff Correa

The World Apple and Pear Association has elected Jeff Correa, director of international marketing at Pear Bureau Northwest, as chairman of the association. "This is a unique opportunity

to lead and serve this global organization and bring my perspective and background as a pear marketer to add to the collaborative efforts the organization currently undertakes," Correa said.

Category Partners names director of analytics



Walter Liu

Category Partners has appointed Walter Liu as director of analytics. With a background in category management and market research, Liu brings experience from his tenures at Del Monte

Fresh Produce and Coca-Cola Bottling Co. Liu will enhance the company's retail analytics function and to further develop its capabilities in operations analytics.

Axia Vegetable Seeds adds to its commercial team



Rafael Lacaz Ruiz

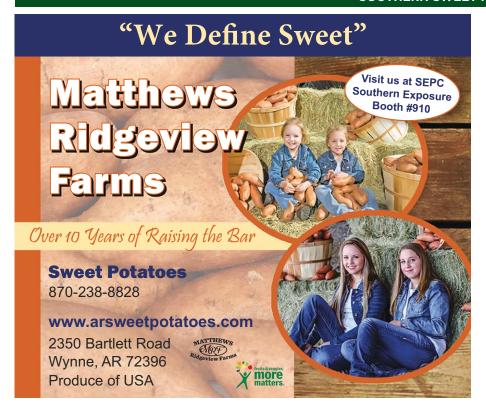
Axia Vegetable Seeds, a Holland-based company that specializes in developing tomato seeds for protected crops, has hired Rafael Lacaz Ruiz as a protected culture sales representative

covering the U.S. and Canada. Lacaz Ruiz has more than 20 years of experience in the vegetable industry, including work in the greenhouse vegetable seed industry for the past 13 years.

BeeHero adds chief sales and marketing officer

Precision pollination company BeeHero has added Ze'ev Barylka as its chief sales and marketing officer. Barylka will direct its strategic sales and marketing efforts around the world. He has more than 20 years of experience in agtech and knowledge in both direct-to-grower and B2B go-to-market strategies. P

SOUTHERN SWEET POTATO DIRECTORY







John Deere's vineyard of the future project collaborates with Sonoma County Winegrowers to incorporate the company's technology to better address some of the challenges facing growers today. Photo: rmbarricarte, Adobe Stock

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ing costs of farming. He said farms of the future will likely integrate more electric and battery-powered equipment in the coming years. Automation will play a big part in agriculture equipment, he said, as it supplements the crews working on farms.

"[Automation is] not meant to eliminate all jobs," he said, noting automation will help growers better deploy existing crews into other jobs on the farm.

The other major component of the future of specialty crop farming is the utilization of data, Sundberg said. Growers will soon be able to understand how applications in each block or section of the vineyard impact quality and yield. He said growers will also be able to understand other factors that go into yield including sunlight, irrigation and soil type to provide a full picture of the growing season and conditions,

"Then you can make real-time decisions

that are going to allow you to say if I can do this here, I will get that there, and you're going to be that much better off as an operation," he said.

Sundberg also shared how the vineyard of the future trial includes utilizing John Deere's Smart Apply which detects canopy density to help calculate the necessary spray density to better target applications and avoid overspraying or drift. Sundberg said John Deere will trial Smart Apply in Sonoma County this year on existing sprayers. Initial trials show a lot of promise from a cost savings perspective, but Sundberg said that isn't the only goal for the growers in the project.

"I think that if you were to ask these growers, they're going to say [saving] money's great," he said. "... but it really goes back to am I being a good steward of the land? Am I being a good steward of the environment? And that's exactly what this is helping them do." P

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selfless person whom many consult about for anything from marketing to legislative issues on state and national levels.

"He's worked hard for our potato industry in Colorado and also on the national scene," Mattive said. "He's been very proactive. ... People look to him as a resource if they need to find out something about potatoes in Colorado. Jim is their go-to person."

Mattive said Ehrlich was instrumental in organizing a tour of Colorado packing facilities for a delegation from Mexico, which was a critical moment to build relationships as U.S. potato exports to Mexico grew. Ehrlich also helped organize tours for the EPA and Colorado legislators to help them better understand the concerns and needs of the potato industry, Mattive said.

"Jim has really been good about bringing those people to the [San Luis Valley in Colorado] to get a firsthand view of some of the things that we do to produce potatoes," he said.

Ehrlich held previous roles with Coors Brewing Co. and JDE Farms. He also gives back to the community as vice president of San Luis Valley Health Hospital's board of directors and as the current president of the San Luis Valley Overall Extension Advisory Board, where he has served as a board member for more than 20 years.

When asked what his favorite memory of his time with the Colorado Potato Administrative Committee, Ehrlich said he fondly enjoyed his time in Washington, D.C., over the years at NPC's Washington Summit, as well as some of the things he and his fellow Colorado delegates experi-

"We actually left one of our fellow growers at the airport one day on our flight back. And then we had another grower that was sick on the plane, and we kept downplaying it, and he had to have his gallbladder removed the next day," he said. "It's just the friendships you make and the experiences you have. They've been awesome." P



FTC files lawsuit against Kroger-Albertson merger

By Aaron Gonzalez

he Federal Trade Commission has filed a lawsuit aiming to prevent the largest proposed supermarket merger in U.S. history — The Kroger Co's \$24.6 billion deal with the Albertsons Cos. — saying that the merger is anticompetitive.

The FTC claims that the proposed deal will eliminate fierce competition between Kroger and Albertsons, leading to higher prices for groceries and other essential household items for millions of U.S. consumers. The FTC also said in the filing that the loss of competition will also lead to lower-quality products and services while also narrowing consumers' choices for where to shop for groceries.

"This supermarket mega merger comes as American consumers have seen the cost of groceries rise steadily over the past few years," Henry Liu, director of the FTC's bureau of competition, said in a news release. "Kroger's acquisition of Albertsons would lead to additional grocery price hikes for everyday goods, further exacerbating the financial strain consumers across the country face today. Essential grocery store workers would also suffer under this deal, facing the threat of their wages dwindling, benefits diminishing and their working conditions deteriorating."

The FTC issued an administrative complaint and authorized a lawsuit in federal court to block the proposed acquisition pending the commission's administrative proceedings, according to the release. A bipartisan group of nine attorneys general is joining the FTC's federal court complaint, including the attorneys general of Arizona, California, the District of Columbia, Illinois, Maryland, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon and Wyoming are joining the commission's



The FTC has filed a lawsuit to halt the largest U.S. supermarket merger - Kroger's \$24.6 billion purchase of Albertsons Cos. claiming the deal is anticompetitive, risking higher prices for essential items. Photos, from top: billtster, Adobe Stock; JHVEPhoto,

federal lawsuit. the release said.

The commission vote to issue the administrative complaint and authorize staff to seek a temporary restraining order and preliminary injunction in federal district court was 3-0. The federal court complaint and request for preliminary relief will be filed jointly with the state attorneys general in the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon.

Kroger operates thousands of stores across 36 states, which includes regional banners such as Fred Meyer, Fry's, Harris Teeter, King Soopers, Kroger and Quality Food Centers. Albertsons also operates thousands of stores across 35 states under regional names including Albertsons, Haggen, Jewel-Osco, Pavilions, Safeway and Vons. If the merger were completed, Kroger and Albertsons would operate more than 5,000 stores and approximately 4,000 retail pharmacies and would employ nearly 700,000 employees across 48 states.

The FTC further claims, in addition to raising grocery prices, that Kroger's acquisition of Albertsons would also diminish their incentive to compete on quality and that the deal would eliminate head-to-head price and quality competition, which have driven both supermarkets to lower their prices and improve their product and service offerings.

An Albertsons Cos. spokesperson responded to the FTC lawsuit stating: "Albertsons Cos. merging with Kroger will expand competition, lower prices, increase associate

wages, protect union jobs and enhance customers' shopping experience. If the Federal Trade Commission is successful in blocking this merger, it would be hurting customers and helping strengthen larger, multi-channel retailers such as Amazon, Walmart and Costco — the very companies the FTC claims to be reining in — by allowing them to continue increasing their growing dominance of the

"In contrast, Albertsons Cos.' merger with Kroger will ensure our neighborhood supermarkets can better compete with these mega retailers, all while benefitting our customers, associates, and communities," the statement continued. "We are disappointed that the FTC continues to use the same outdated view of the U.S. grocery industry it used 20 years ago, and we look forward to presenting our arguments in court."

Kroger also responded to the FTC lawsuit, stating in a news release: "Contrary to the FTC's statements, blocking Kroger's merger with Albertsons Companies will actually harm the very people the FTC purports to serve: America's consumers and workers. Kroger's business model is to take costs out of the business and invest in lowering prices for

"Kroger has reduced prices every year since 2003, resulting in \$5 billion invested to lower prices and a 5% reduction in gross margin over this period. This business model is immediately applied to merger companies," the statement continued. "Kroger has a proven track record of lowering prices so more customers benefit from fresh, affordable food, and our proposed merger with Albertsons will mean even lower prices and more choices for America's consumers.

non-unionized retailers like Walmart, Costco dominance of the grocery industry." P

"The FTC's decision makes it more likely that America's consumers will see higher food prices and fewer grocery stores at a time when communities across the country are already facing high inflation and food deserts. In fact, this decision only strengthens larger, and Amazon by allowing them to further increase their overwhelming and growing

"Kroger's acquisition of Albertsons would lead to additional grocery price hikes for everyday goods, further exacerbating the financial strain consumers across the country face today."

- Henry Liu, Federal Trade Commission



Report details in-store and online behaviors of omnichannel shoppers

Scan to view the full report.

By Aaron Gonzalez

n "Omnichannel Special Report" from data insights firm 84.51° examined who omnichannel shoppers are, where they shop and some of the reasons why they choose to shop in-store and online.

84.51° helps The Kroger Co. and its partners create customer-centric shopper journeys, unpacks the continuing effect of omnichannel on consumer behavior, based on real-time insights surveys.

The base used for the study included only those who shopped both in-store and online at Kroger — also called hybrid shoppers — over a 52-week period.

According to the report, this shopper is likely to be a millennial or of Generation Z, engaged with natural and organic, more likely to have children and is focused on convenience, compared to the average grocery shopper. With only 40% of omnichannel shoppers saying they shop mostly online, these shoppers still make 83% of their trips in-store versus pickup or delivery, the report said.

nichannel shoppers said that they spend less time ordering online compared to in-store. Over 80% of these shoppers who use pickup and delivery cited convenience as the reason for doing so.

Claims of less stress have significantly increased from 2023, accord-

ing to the report. This year, 58% of shoppers said in the report it's less stressful to shop online than in-store, compared to 39% in 2023. And 57% of shoppers said online shopping has become their preferred method of shopping, compared to 28% in 2023.

When shopping in-store, claims of preferring to pick items, avoiding extra fees and not wanting the wrong item have increased since 2023, the report said. Fifty-six percent preferred to pick out their groceries and 51% wanted to avoid pickup or delivery fees.

Omni-shoppers continued to prefer buying fresh categories in-store. Like the 2023 study, 75% of omnichannel shoppers

Forty-six percent of om-

ferred to purchase fresh produce, bakery and deli/ meat/seafood in-store. Paper products, shelf-stable goods and household cleaning are the most preferred for purchasing online.

claimed that they pre-

Over 80% of omnichannel shoppers claimed that order accuracy and

availability are important when shopping online, and 23% will shift their spending elsewhere if items are out of stock, the report said.

Accuracy and availability are so im-

portant that brands may be missing out if items are out of stock, according to the report. Nineteen percent of shoppers said they will buy the out-of-stock item online elsewhere, and 4% will switch their entire cart to a different online retailer that has the item in stock.

Omni-shoppers rely on a retailer's website or app for inspiration, according to the report. Almost 50% of omnichannel shoppers, and even more for younger shoppers, are using social media as inspiration for their shopping lists. They are still more likely to try new items in-store but will use search or a dedicated section of a site to find those new items. **P**

When shopping in-store, claims of preferring to pick items, avoiding extra fees and not wanting the wrong item have increased since 2023, the report said. Fifty-six percent preferred to pick out their groceries and 51% wanted to avoid pickup or delivery fees.



84.51° released its "Omnichannel Special Report" that examines consumer behaviors of the unique omnichannel shopper. Image courtesy of 84.51°



Report shows gap between loyalty membership and consumer shopping behavior

By Aaron Gonzalez

he first report in a two-part series from digital marketplace Upside on loyalty programs and their effect on consumer behavior found gaps between loyalty membership and the desired behavioral shifts that retailers anticipate from those programs.

The report draws insights from a comprehensive survey of nearly 2,000 consumers, according to a news release

"Consumers are actively seeking value, and retailers are wise to use tools like loyalty programs that don't cannibalize existing profits to address that need," Alex Kinnier, CEO and co-founder of Upside, said in the release. "These survey findings indicate that today's loyalty offerings have become table stakes for customers, and retailers have an opportunity to do things differently to get more out of their existing investment."

The survey uncovered encouraging insights regarding loyalty programs. For instance, more than half of consumers enrolled in a loyalty program base their shopping decisions — including where to shop, which items to purchase and how much to buy — on those programs, the report said. Furthermore, according to the survey, nearly 40% of loyalty members indicated that they would stop shopping at a specific location if the store terminated its loyalty program.

However, certain findings from the survey shine light on unexpected loyalty shortcomings for grocery, restaurant, fuel and convenience store retailers, the release said. Varying based on buying category, insights

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The Mushroom Council says it's taking a "surround sound" approach to the campaign targeting loyalists with messaging that illustrates fresh mushrooms' crave-ability. Photo courtesy of The Mushroom Council

Mushroom Council targets fungi fans with new multimedia campaign

By Jennifer Strailey

he Mushroom Council's new multimedia advertising campaign aims to encourage those who already love mushrooms to purchase even more.

Launching March 1, the "Mushroom Loyalist" campaign will reach the top third of mushroom buyers who account for almost 75% of all mushroom dollar sales and 68% of all mushroom purchases, the council says. These heavy mushroom buyers skew older with the majority being baby boomer and Gen X shoppers, according to shopper research fielded by IRI, ending May 15, 2022.

"In a period when inflationary pressures are forcing grocery shoppers to make every dollar count, the smartest and most efficient marketing move is to go straight to the dedicated mushroom fan," said retail analyst Anne-Marie Roerink, 210 Analytics, LLC, in a news release. "These loyalists already love mushrooms and use them across many meal occasions and recipes. By leaning into their love for mushrooms,

we hope to encourage at least one more mushroom purchase at retail and one more restaurant order of a menu item featuring mushrooms."

A 'surround sound' campaign

The Mushroom Council says it's taking a "surround sound" approach to the cam-

paign targeting loyalists with messaging that illustrates fresh mushrooms' crave-ability. Video and static ads will focus heavily on mushrooms' distinctive flavor in an array of quick and easy meals.

The Mushroom Council says the multifaceted campaign will include:

• Shopper data-informed advertising — The Mush-room Council is collaborating with media partner Catalina to reach heavy buyers directly with online banner ads at the moment they are planning meals. In addition, they will serve ads and recipe inspiration to mushroom loyalists in-store, via at-register printed handouts.

• Contextual recipe advertising —

Mushroom Council partner Chicory will serve the ads next to quick and easy recipe content, specifically in mushroom recipes and recipes that include products often purchased with mushrooms, such as bell peppers, onions and chicken.

• Streaming television and YouTube spots — The Mushroom Council's new

Scan to see a video

ad spot in the digital

version of this story.

30-, 15- and six-second streaming spots will air on streaming platforms such as Hulu, Paramount+, CNN and Cooking Channel, specifically aimed at boomers and Gen Xers with interest in cooking, grilling, plant-forward meals and travel.

• Social media and search engine ads — The campaign's video and static ads also will

come to life via targeted campaigns on social media and search engine results.

The Mushroom Council says the campaign, which will run heaviest March through May and conclude in August, is projected to reach 40 million mushroom loyalists at a frequency of seven times each. **P**



Activist group claims European produce shows rising 'forever chemicals'

By Tom Karst

ruit and vegetables in Europe are increasingly contaminated with PFAS pesticide residues, according to a new report from the Pesticide Action Network Europe.

"Toxic Harvest: The rise of forever pesticides in fruit and vegetables in Europe," states the number of European fruit and vegetables with detected PFAS pesticide residues has nearly tripled between 2011 and 2021, with a growth rate of 220% for fruit and of 274% for vegetables, according to a news release.

The ongoing accumulation of PFAS in soils, waters and the food chain, along with other chemical substances or "chemical cocktails," pose long-term risks to human health and the environment, the release said.

"A ban on the use of PFAS pesticides is urgent to curb European citizen exposure to PFAS pesticides and protect citizen health, including that of the most vulnerable groups, such as pregnant women, babies and children," the Pesticide Action Network Europe said.

The study tracked the presence of the active substances used in pesticides in the EU that are per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, known as PFAS. A detailed analysis of the 2021 data, the most recent published to date, shows that non-organic fruit, especially summer fruit, are the products most frequently contaminated with PFAS pesticide residues, according to the release.

Zooming in on fruits grown in Europe, 37% of strawberries, 35% of peaches and 31% of apricots are contaminated, the release said. Of this contaminated European-grown fruit, 20% contain cocktails of PFAS pesticide residues, with up to four different PFAS pesticides detected in a single sample of strawberries and table grapes, and up to three in peaches and apricots, according to the release.

Among imported fruit and vegetables, those most likely to contain residues of PFAS pesticides came from Costa Rica (41%), India (38%), South Africa (28%), Colombia (26%) and Morocco (24%), the release said.

In 2021, the most often detected PFAS active substances in contaminated European-grown products were the fungicide fluopyram, the insecticide flonicamid and the fungicide trifloxystrobin, the report said. **P**

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from Upside's data indicate that:

- As many as half (41% to 51%) of respondents do not factor in a loyalty program when choosing where to buy.
- More than a third (33% to 46%) of respondents have not increased their purchasing frequency since joining a loyalty program.

• Almost two-thirds (58% to 63%) stated that the absence of a loyalty program at a store would not affect their shopping habits.

Upside said that while some of the findings may seem counterintuitive, its findings on consumer indifference may stem from various factors, including:

• Loyalty proliferation — Comparing data from the 2015 and 2023 Bond Loy-

alty Reports, the average shopper has nearly doubled the number of loyalty memberships in their wallet over the past decade.

• Lack of differentiation — Loyalty programs have become increasingly similar to one another, hindering retailers from distinguishing themselves among customers. **P**



SUSTAINABILITY & CLIMATE



"From Day 1, Agrovision has remained fully committed to developing a modern agribusiness, coupled with a commitment to lift up the communities in which we operate — Peru, Mexico and Morocco — by bringing economic stability and advocating for social responsibility, including care for the environment and women's rights, along the way," says CEO Steve Magami. Photo: Courtesy of Agrovision

The state of sustainability

How the fresh produce supply chain has answered the call — and what challenges remain for the industry

By Christina Herrick

hether it's increased scrutiny on food waste, possible plastic packaging bans or crackdowns on water use, sustainability continues to be a significant driver in the fresh produce industry. With the added demand comes many opportunities to highlight what companies are already doing to address such issues, according to those throughout the supply chain.

Giovanni Cavaletto, U.S. division president of avocado grower and shipper GLC Cerritos, says growers working on multigenerational farms are inherently conservationists.

"Farmers are always looking to take care of the places where they live in and work," he said. "A lot of times they'll be working the same properties that their parents and grandparents farm, and so there's already kind of a built-in [idea of] 'This is going to

last for a while. It's been handed down."

Jon Roesser, general manager of Weavers Way, a Pennsylvania-based member-owned cooperative grocer, says sustainability is an essential part of the retailer's values, whether it's using extra produce for in-store prepared food, donating produce to a local food bank or sending food scraps to a high school-operated farm and composting center.

"As a matter of policy, we need to factor environmental considerations into all business decisions," he said. "When it comes to sustainability efforts, it's sort of baked into our business model because it's been identified by our members as something important to them."

A grocer's perspective

Roesser says the company's values sometimes conflict with its objective as a grocer.

Take blueberries, for example. Some co-op members see blueberries as seasonal fruit and should only be available from local sources in the Philadelphia metro area, he said, and other members don't want to shop at another store to purchase blueberries when they're not available locally.

"We have to accept that to run a full-service grocery store means accepting certain environmental compromises," Roesser said. "We take every reasonable mitigation step

He said that includes sustainable packaging, cutting down on food waste and using renewable energy to run the stores.

Weavers Way only carries organic, fair-trade bananas. Some members want the retailer to carry conventionally grown bananas at a lower price point, Roesser said, but bananas are one category the retailer holds firm in its offerings based on sustainable sourcing.

"That is a decision that we made a long time ago and stuck to over the years despite market pressures to occasionally reexamine that decision," he said. "I try to convey to our members that you are not going to agree with every product philosophy decision we make. We think much longer and much harder about this stuff than your conventional grocery store ... and we think there is more nuance to how we arrive at our decisions."

A grower's perspective

Cavaletto of GLC Cerritos says a focus on GlobalGAP and Rainforest Alliance certifications was an investment in time and money, but it helped the company gain entry to key European accounts. He said the company sees social sustainability as a critical component.

GLC Cerritos participates in Stronger-2Gether, which uses Clearview U.S. to offer global responsible recruitment certification. Stronger2Gether helps GLC Cerritos recruit and keep the best workers, Cavaletto said.

"We really look at it as an investment in the long term," he said. "It is, in essence, favorable long term both on the social responsibility side as well as the environmental side."

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FROM BERRY VARIETIES TO PACKAGING, SUSTAINABILITY DRIVES EVERY DECISION WE MAKE



SUSTAINABILITY & CLIMATE

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Cavaletto said the company sometimes struggles with competing values of food safety and sustainability.

"Trying to find a balance between the two, sometimes it feels like those two components are fundamentally in conflict," he said.

Janis McIntosh, director of marketing innovation and sustainability at Salinas, Calif.-based producer and marketer Naturipe Farms, said the company uses sustainable farming practices such as composting, chop-and-drop pruning and drip irrigation.

McIntosh said Naturipe also focused on using greener transportation and renewable energy. "Just this year our flagship cooler in Watsonville, Calif., switched to solar energy, resulting in an estimated 1,181 metric tons of CO2 avoided each year."

Brianna Shales, marketing director for Wenatchee, Wash.-based Stemilt Growers, a packer, grower and distributor of tree fruit, said the company formalized its Responsible Choice social responsibility and sustainability program in 1989.

"Caring for the land is what will make our business sustainable for future generations to come," she said. "Integrated pest management was one of the first initiatives Stemilt tackled and is now commonplace today."

Shales said Stemilt also created a dedicated pollinator habitat as part of its Bee Friendly Farming certification and uses a large-scale compost farm and green waste capture program at its packing facilities.

"It's a circular approach to sustainability," she said. "We also track and evaluate waste, recycling, water usage, electricity and more to save money and have positive environmental impacts."

Shales said Stemilt's orchards and warehouses also meet the Equitable Food Initiative's certification standards for food safety, integrated pest management and responsible labor practices.

"Most sustainability initiatives that are implemented are ones that are going to pay back in time, either through cost savings or efficiencies," she said.

Packaging companies' perspectives

Rachel Kenyon, senior vice president of the Fibre Box Association, says the corrugated industry's life-cycle assessments show a dramatic shift in the environmental impact of U.S.-produced corrugated boxes. The association estimates corrugated products use about 52% recycled content on average.

"The industry has reduced its per-unit greenhouse gas emissions for an average U.S. corrugated box by 50% from 2006 to



Naturipe Farms uses sustainable farming practices and also focuses on using greener transportation and renewable energy. "Just this year our flagship cooler in Watsonville, Calif., switched to solar energy, resulting in an estimated 1,181 metric tons of CO2 avoided each year," said Janis McIntosh, director of marketing innovation and sustainability. Photo: Courtesy of Naturipe Farms



Stemilt Growers has instituted multiple sustainability initiatives in its operations, including using a large-scale compost farm and green waste capture program at its packing facilities. "Caring for the land is what will make our business sustainable for future generations to come," said Brianna Shales. marketing director. Photo: Courtesy of Stemilt Growers

2020," she said.

She says the industry also saw a reduction in ozone depletion, energy and water usage, acid rain, smog and more. The industry also saw notable improvements in energy efficiency, recycling infrastructure and sustainably managed forests.

"As an industry, they have been proactively working to minimize their environmental impacts since long before 'sustainability' became a buzzword, let alone a business imperative," she continued. "Many of our members are publicly traded companies, so their efforts and results are now folding into ESG reporting programs."

Karen Reed, global director of marketing and communications for Kwik Lok Corp., says CEO Don Carrell saw a need to explore plastic alternatives years ago before he took the helm of the Yakima, Wash.-based bag closure company. Kwik Lok started using its

bioplastic solutions before regulations arose and before consumers pressured manufacturers to cut plastic use.

"I've never seen the sustainability visibility be as high as it is right now," she said.

Reed said finding sustainable closure solutions for the produce industry is a challenge.

"Produce, in particular, is going to likely be in a cooler, wetter environment," she said. "So that makes it an interesting challenge to come up with a better than the plastic that we have been using, which has been polystyrene."

Bioplastics break down quicker and are not necessarily a fit for produce closures, she said, adding that Kwik Lok launched a polypropylene-based closure called Enviro-Lok that uses 34% less plastic than the company's standard closures.

"It's set up better for recycling," Reed said.

Roadblocks to sustainability

Roesser of Weavers Way says satisfying consumer demands is a challenge for universal sustainability efforts. While consumers often motivate retailers to opt for more sustainable practices, they also have shopping expectations of convenience and value.

"I'm as guilty as everybody else," Roesser said. "All of us have come to expect that our produce is going to be forever abundant, cheap and available whenever we want. And if that means turning a blind eye to fossil fuel use, pesticide use, worker exploitation and single-use plastic use in the name of affordability and convenience, then for a lot of consumers, that's all that matters to them."

Roesser says grocers, too, suffer from the need for convenience and value. They must keep shelves filled and often choose a more reliable and consistent vendor to maintain competitiveness.

"We, as a retailer, also face roadblocks because running a retail grocery store is hard work," he said. "Sustainability efforts — it's so easy for those to get put on the back burner. It's not that we don't care about them, it's just that we've got a business to run here."

Roesser said it's also hard for consumers to understand that sustainability is about the long game. Efforts today might not be understood or appreciated until years later.

"I think it really incumbent upon us, as retailers and consumers, to be constantly reminding ourselves that this has to be a priority, and we have to get innovative, and we have to change our mindset," he said.

Kwik Lok's Reed says with so much information — and disinformation — it often feels like the Wild West; regulations can vary from each state and municipality, which adds an additional challenge.

"Even if I want to do the right thing, what is the right thing?" she said.

Future of sustainability

Robby Johnson, senior manager of corporate communications for Atlanta-based WestRock Co., a provider of differentiated paper and packaging solutions, says the regulatory environment is constantly evolving.

"Canada is leading the charge in North America, making broader sweeps at plastic reduction — including nationwide single-use plastic bans most recently targeted directly at the fresh produce industry," he

In a pre-proposal regulation, Environment and Climate Change Canada — the

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SUSTAINABILITY & CLIMATE

"I think it really incumbent upon us, as retailers and consumers, to be constantly reminding ourselves that this has to be a priority, and we have to get innovative, and we have to change our mindset."

Jon Roesser, Weavers Way

SUSTAINABILITY from page 12

government agency responsible for environmental policy — called for 75% of all fresh produce sold in the country to be sold in bulk or nonplastic packaging by 2026 and to increase to 95% by 2028.

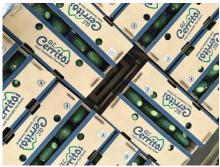
McIntosh of Naturipe Farms said she sees sustainability certifications becoming more common for those working in the produce industry.

"Like food safety certifications, I see the potential of environmental sustainability certifications becoming more prevalent, meeting the needs of the retailer and consumer," she said.

Shales of Stemilt Growers said she sees technology taking an active role in the future of sustainability efforts. Sustainability standards would also help the industry better measure efforts and help companies direct resources toward making a bigger impact, she said.

"We need easier ways to measure inputs related to sustainability," she says. "It can be quite complicated to collect data on water usage, for instance, because it varies from one season to another and from one orchard to another. We need to make it easier on farmers and suppliers to collect and relay the data, which is what really helps move the needle on sustainability initiatives."

Reed says consumers will continue to pressure manufacturers to find better solutions, adding that industry involvement is another critical part of sustainability's future. She said Kwik Lok participates in global and national plastics organizations



GLC Cerritos has sought out multiple sustainability certifications, which are an investment of time and money but are ultimately a long-term investment for the social responsibility side and the environmental side, says Giovanni Cavaletto, U.S. division president for the avocado grower and shipper. Photo: Courtesy of GLC Cerritos

and the International Fresh Produce Association to advocate for the responsible use of plastics in the fresh produce industry.

"Packaging plays a role in food not getting wasted," Reed said. "We need to make

sure that the systems we have in place are going to help us manage that problem. The number of people who are really wrapping their minds around this is enormous. We just have to keep moving forward. It's not a

straight line, it's a zigzag. We've got to just keep doing our best. It's not easy, it's not going to happen tomorrow." **P**



Agrovision sets sights on sustainability and women's rights

By Jennifer Strailey

os Angeles-based Agrovision, a producer and year-round supplier of blueberries, raspberries, blackberries and cherries, is on a journey — one that co-founder, CEO and Executive Chairman Steve Magami says seamlessly intertwines sustainable agribusiness with ecological preservation, societal empowerment and global health improvement.

In February, The Packer interviewed the Agrovision exec via email about the



Steve Magami

vertically integrated company's recent 10-year anniversary; its growing operations and commercial partnerships in Peru, the U.S., Mexico, Morocco, China, India and Romania; goals for the year ahead; and

its business model, which it says is aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations.

Editor's note: *The following is a sustainability-focused excerpt from that interview.*

The Packer: We spoke with Agrovision Chief Commercial Officer
Steve McVickers at the recent Fruit
Logistica in Berlin, where he shared some of Agrovision's sustainable farming initiatives in Peru, including redirecting the Amazon to transform barren desert into a farming oasis. What are some of Agrovision's achievements, with regard to sustainable farming and building sustainable communities, of which you are most proud?

Magami: From Day 1, Agrovision has remained fully committed to developing a modern agribusiness, coupled with a commitment to lift up the communities in which we operate — Peru, Mexico and Morocco — by bringing economic stability and advocating for social responsibility, including care for the environment and women's rights, along the way.

How is Agrovision seeking to reduce the social inequities within the



Agriculture in South America is creating an economy that would not otherwise exist, says Agrovision co-founder, CEO and Executive Chairman Steve Magami. Photo: Courtesy of Agrovision

Our team in Peru earns an attractive monthly wage that is improving the quality of lives and building communities.

communities it farms?

Many of our Peruvian workforce — up to 15,000 field workers during peak harvest — come from remote impoverished areas throughout the country. Agrovision provides these workers ample opportunities for stable employment — not only working in the fields and running machinery, but also in the service sector: transportation, retail, medical services, technical, IT, engineering and more.

Agriculture in South America is creating an economy that would not otherwise exist. Our team in Peru earns an attractive monthly wage that is improving the quality of lives and building communities.

Further, more than half of the Peruvian workforce are women. Employment provides financial independence, promotes social stability and builds self-esteem. For many of the women, it is the first time they have opened a bank account — a huge source of pride for many.

Agrovision [also] sponsors football leagues, provides much needed school supplies and medical equipment, supplies water to communities where there is none, and helps families with abused, battered women and much more.

How do Agrovision's sustainability efforts align with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals?

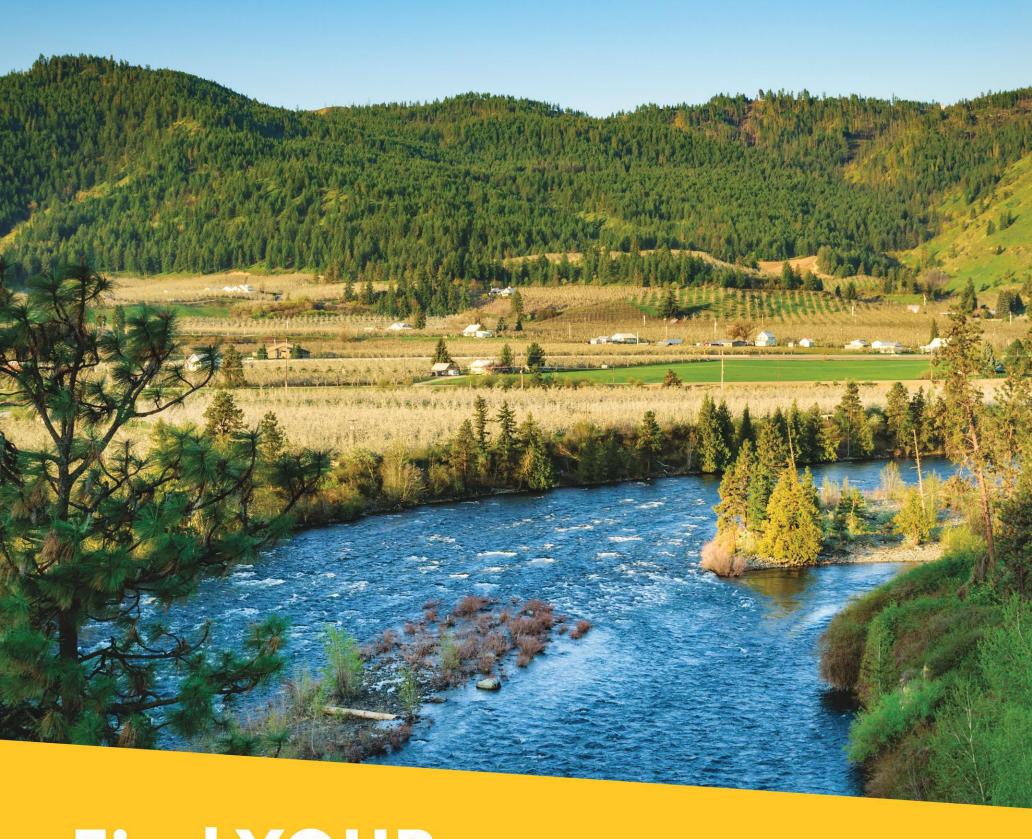
The company is proud to be aligned with 11 of the 17 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and to have earned the most prestigious certifications. It's a testament to how a company's growth can

be intertwined with creating a better world for future generations.

Agrovision has a robust genetics program. Beyond climate change, what are the key drivers of the program and how does it relate to improved fruit quality and a sustainable food supply?

Genetics are foundational, and we continually seek out the newest berry varietals that set new standards for quality across flavor, size, texture and freshness.

Better genetics also means better for the environment. We invest in sustainable agriculture in the farming communities in which we operate. We operate with transparency, honesty and fairness, and shared passion and purpose across our teams. **P**



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BeeHero deploys research stations to provide users real-time data

By Christina Herrick

eeHero, a data-driven precision pollination company, says it has launched three Pollination Research Stations in California's Central Valley to provide users the ability to track and monitor bloom progress and bee activity.

BeeHero said its Pollination Research Stations deliver real-time, accurate and extensive data on bloom progression and bee activity. The company said these research stations will provide visibility for growers who previously operated with minimal

"We're not just measuring massive amounts of data, we're transforming pollination practices. Our innovative platform is a unique source of this type of live information for growers, essentially providing a 'bee livestream' that grants unprecedented access to the heartbeat of pollination," BeeHero co-founder and CEO Omer Davidi said in a news release.

The research stations use advanced scientific monitoring techniques and artificial intelligence analysis, according to the release. BeeHero said the stations collect and analyze data to provide insights in a public dashboard, which enables growers to refine their practices, mitigate risks and boost pollination.

"From the outset, our research project set out to uncover new insights into the intricate world of bees, but we quickly

realized its greater potential to help transform local growers' practices," Doreet Avni, head of bio-research at BeeHero, said in the release. "Opening growers' eyes to this real-time data they've never had before is like bringing science fiction to life."

The company said each station includes precision instrumentation including:

- Weather monitoring equipment that alerts growers to potential frost advisories.
- Bee counters to provide accurate bee flight times for precise tracking of pollination activity to the single-bee level.
- Scales that offer insights into colony weight gain, a key indicator of foraging and pollination effectiveness.
- · Cameras to provide visual confirmation of bloom progression. P



BeeHero's new research stations help growers understand what's going on in hives during pollination. Photo: Elena Noeva, Adobe Stock

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Survey: Growers could add 10.5 million new cover crop acres

By The Packer Staff

he American Seed Trade
Association says a recent
survey found growers plan to add
10.5 million acres of cover crops
planted in the next five years. ASTA said
the increase is due to USDA's Partnerships
for Climate-Smart Commodities, which
supports conservation practices for small
and underserved producers.

"Cover crops are another example of the seed industry providing solutions for the modern producer. From farms big to small, cover crops provide economic and environmental benefits to farmers, while empowering them to be stewards of the land through its sustainable practice," ASTA President and CEO Andy LaVigne said in a news release.

ASTA said its survey focused on cover



Growers in a USDA conservation program plan to increase cover crop acres, including buckwheat, according to a new survey by the American Seed Trade Association. Photo: juliedeshaies, Adobe Stock

crop acres through the lifespan of the USDA project and used numbers provided by project leads. The organization conducted this survey during the fourth quarter of 2023 and contacted participants in the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities program. ASTA focused

"Cover crops are another example of the seed industry providing solutions for the modern producer."

- Andy LaVigne, American Seed Trade Association

on growers in the program that used the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Conservation Practice Standard No. 340 for cover crops.

ASTA said 31 project participants filled out surveys and 18 shared acreage estimates. The 18 projects that shared acreage estimates planned to add 10.5 million acres of cover crops during the three- or five-year project duration, according to the release. ASTA said this is likely a conservative number and may be significantly higher.

The organization said, of the 123 projects surveyed, growers indicated using or planning to use CPS No. 340 in 88 projects

across 82 commodities. Federal funding for these projects is \$2.39 billion, the release said.

ASTA said the benefits include slowing erosion, improving soil health, and controlling pests and diseases.

"ASTA continues to explore new methods, both private and public, to connect producers with quality cover crop seeds," LaVigne said. "We encourage farmers and producers of all sizes to use our environment, conservation and cover crop seed dealer map to find a trusted cover crop source that will help them maximize their yield and care for their soil through the next planting season and beyond." **P**



Driscoll's new video series highlights sustainability efforts

By Christina Herrick

atsonville, Calif.-based Driscoll's recently debuted a new video miniseries called "One Family, One Earth," which it said will bring consumers closer to its growers, harvesters and grocers and showcase a shared passion for berries, values around sustainability and a vision for growing communities.

The company's new campaign is found at Driscolls.com/OneFamilyOneEarth.

"Our goal with this campaign is to build and deepen consumer brand trust and generate inspiration through transparent, credible and authentic storytelling," Alejandra Sanchez, sustainability and social impact marketing manager for Driscoll's, said in a news release. "The interdependence between agriculture, people and the environment is essential to our daily lives. The need to sustain and nurture these relationships becomes critical to our future. One Family One Earth demonstrates, that around the world, the individuals that make up the Driscoll's family are building longevity for their farms, their communities and the earth."

Driscoll's said the "One Family, One Earth" series will consist of five docu-style short films intended to build stronger connections through storytelling. The films give consumers an inside look at Driscoll's art of growing, its workforce, its environmental stewardship and its communities, the release said.

The company said it will highlight ele-



Building on its One Family video series, Driscoll's will release a new mini-series focusing on its growing communities and the company's values around sustainability. Image courtesy of Driscoll's

ments of its operations throughout the series to promote its vision to enrich the lives of everyone who connects with Driscoll's.

"The campaign will launch with a digital forward strategy that will initially focus on reach and engagement on our own website and social media platforms," Jamie Bassmann, director of brand and digital for Driscoll's, said in the release. "While our target audience is millennial moms, we've invested in consumer research to ensure our messaging and positioning will resonate with Gen Z, our future consumer. This group is gravitating towards brands that lead with their values. We'll use paid media to measure brand affinity with our target audiences and ensure success."

Driscoll's said the new campaign honors

the communities that participate in its longtime commitment to environmental stewardship and demonstrates the agricultural community's steps towards advancing sustainability within the industry.

The debut of the "One Family, One Earth" campaign will initially feature two short films:

• "Making Waves" — Water, a shared and precious resource, must be managed responsibly to support the long-term viability of agriculture while ensuring local communities and the environment can thrive. In this episode, two growers from Watsonville showcase their unique approach to water stewardship and a shared vision to preserve water resources for their community and their families for generations to come.

• "Field Among Fields" — This film features one of Driscoll's employees and independent growers, who together have created a safe space for kids to play soccer in the Pajaro Valley for the past seven years. The field is home to six teams including Pajaro Valley United. PVU has given opportunities for young women to pursue college scholarships and professional teams including the women's Mexico National team. Driscoll's works alongside local nonprofits, growers and employees to invest in the communities they call home through a series of grants, sponsorships and employee volunteer paid time off.

The company said "One Family, One Earth" highlights its environmental stewardship through a shared passion for berries. **P**

Forum to explore sustainability in global banana supply chain

By Jennifer Strailey

rom climate change to labor rights to gender equality, the World Banana Forum is set to explore key sustainability issues impacting the banana industry at the Fourth Global Conference of the World Banana Forum, March 12-13. Facilitated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the forum is scheduled to take place at FAO headquarters in Rome, Italy.

At 19.1 million tons in 2022, bananas are the most exported fresh fruit in the world by volume, reports the World Banana Forum, which estimates the economic value of bananas is \$10 billion annually. Bananas

are also an essential source of income and nutrition for thousands of rural households in developing countries.

But this critically important industry faces urgent environmental, economic and social challenges that can only be overcome if all banana stakeholders collaborate on solutions, says the WBF.

Providing space for this collaboration in pursuit of a more equitable, sustainable and responsible banana industry is the aim of the Fourth Global Conference of the World Banana Forum.

The conference is set to explore various

Scan to view more information and register



topics related to the sustainability of the banana industry, including environmental impacts, adaptation and mitigation of climate change, sustainable banana production systems, distribution of value in the supply chain, living wages, shared responsibility, due diligence, labor rights, decent work and gender equity.

The agenda for the Fourth Global Conference of the World Banana Forum includes the following panel discussions:

- Setting the scene and looking ahead towards the future of the banana industry.
- The pressing challenges and opportuni-

ties related to climate change and environmental sustainability in the banana industry.

- Achieving a fairer distribution of value.
- Paving a path towards decent work and the adherence to international labor standards in the global banana industry.
- Fusarium Wilt TR4: Strategies for the present and solutions for the future.

Expected to gather stakeholders from across the global banana sector, including governments, relevant international organizations, importers, exporters, retailers, producer organizations, trade unions, civil society organizations and research and development institutes, the conference is free to attend but advance registration is required. **P**





BOXES.

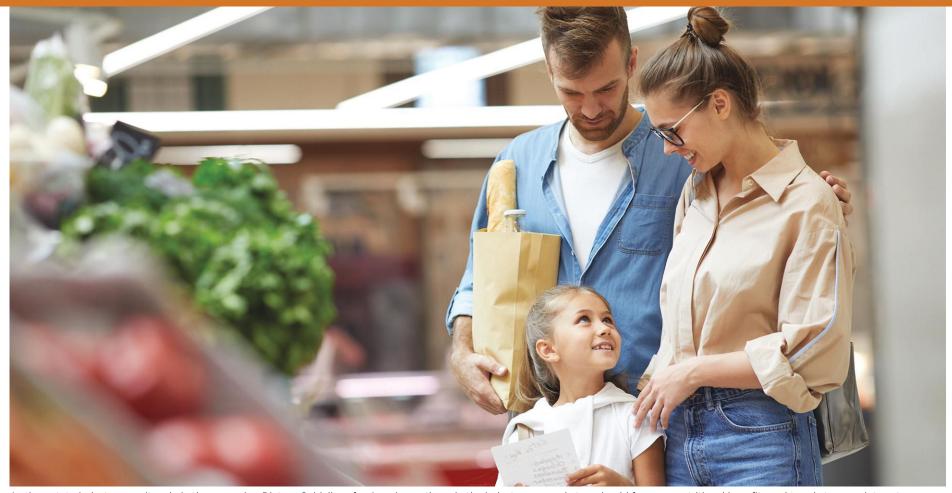
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If you're thinking circular, you're thinking corrugated.

Learn more about the renewability, recyclability and responsibility of boxes at: https://www.fibrebox.org/life-cycle-assessments.

POTATOES MARKETING



As the potato industry eyes its role in the upcoming Dietary Guidelines for Americans, those in the industry say marketers should focus on nutritional benefits and trends to grow interest among younger shoppers. Photo: Seventyfour, Adobe Stock

Potato industry members say it's time to tout nutrition, versatility

By Christina Herrick

ome in the potato industry say they're concerned about the conversation surrounding the role of potatoes in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Specifically, the discussion about whether potatoes should remain a vegetable.

Every five years the USDA and Department of Health and Human Services collaborate to update and release a new dietary recommendation.

National Potato Council CEO Kam Quarles says if potatoes were no longer a vegetable, that decision could have a "massive cascading effect" on the potato industry.

"If they get that wrong, not only does it misinform consumers about the nutrient value of potatoes, it can trickle down," he says. "It certainly would provide a huge impact on this industry and all of those resources that have been built through things like the farm bill that go to specialty crops. If you reclassify potatoes out of the specialty crop [category], out of the vegetable category, we're no longer eligible for programs we built like the [Specialty Crop] Block Grant Program and specialty crop research and all these other things."

Kelly Turner, executive director of the Michigan Potato Industry Commission, says the conversation around potatoes' role in a diet is a great opportunity for marketers to discuss nutritional benefits.

"It's a significant source of potassium and vitamins, including vitamin C. It's a good source of plant-based protein," Turner said. "People don't realize that a medium-sized potato has 3 grams of protein."

And while millennials and Generation Z shoppers may look to low-carb options, Turner said potatoes fit well in vegan, veg-

etarian, whole-food and plant-based diets. Marketers can help shoppers understand the differences between complex carbohydrates and simple sugars.

"Yes, potatoes are a root vegetable, just like sweetpotatoes, carrots, parsnips, onions," she said. "All of those do come with carbs, but it's important to remember, however, that complex carbohydrates, like what you find in fruits and vegetables, whole grains and legumes, are quite different from simple carbs. Helping people understand those differences and educating them on that is a sweet spot for those who are marketing potatoes."

Varieties on the move

Ross Johnson, the vice president of retail and international for the Idaho Potato Commission, says he has seen a noticeable

POTATOES page 22



Taylor Swift Concert | Video

As part of a summer 2023 geo-targeting and digital-out-of-home campaign, the Michigan Potato Industry Commission coordinated a pop music-themed ad campaign to target Taylor Swift's two Eras Tour shows at Ford Field in Detroit. It resulted in more than 730,000 impressions, according to the commission. Image courtesy of Michigan Potato Industry Commission

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the experience to help. To see the whole picture or for a personalized
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analysis visit IdahoPotato.com/Data

POTATOES MARKETING



Michigan Potato Industry Commission digital and print marketing assets feature nutritional information about potatoes and how to use potatoes in Middle Eastern, Asian or Latin dishes, says Executive Director Kelly Turner, who adds that those flavor profiles are also popular with Generation Z and millennials, which can also help bolster interest in potatoes. Photo courtesy of Michigan Potato Industry Commission



POTATOES from page 20

change in consumers' shopping trends in the past few years.

"Five years ago, red potatoes were all the rage," he said. "However, the red category has hit its peak and is plateauing or declining in most areas of the country. Yellow potatoes seem to be resonating with consumers as they continue to climb in importance and popularity."

Turner, too, said that while yellow potatoes are on the rise in Michigan, there's also been a growing interest in purple potatoes for chipping. She's also seen growing interest in alternatives to russet

"We're seeing a bit of a resurgence of people looking for round white varieties because they prefer the taste of those over some of the russets that are out there," she

Turner said Michigan looks to market its fresh potatoes for use in Latin, Asian and Middle Eastern dishes.

"Michigan is actually home to more than 650,000 people who were born outside of the U.S., and a vast majority of those were born in Asia or Latin American regions where potatoes are not nearly as available as they are here, but they also really aren't utilized in their traditional cuisines," she said.

Digital and print marketing assets feature nutritional information about potatoes and how to use potatoes in Middle Eastern, Asian or Latin dishes. Turner said those flavor profiles are also popular with Gen Z and millennials, which can also help bolster interest in potatoes.

Increased exposure

Quarles says a big focus for the National

Potato Council is increased market access for potato exports, which is a vital step in the marketing of potatoes.

"If you don't have access to your market, then you don't have anything to sell," he said. "You don't have anything to promote."

Market access in Mexico, for example, is a big success, he said.

"There are consumers in Mexico who really like our product," Quarles said. "We really can build a market in the entirety of that country. And those partnerships, hopefully, are going to yield what we thought was initially going to be about \$100 million a year market, and we can see a path to getting there."

A significant focus for NPC now is securing access to export fresh potatoes to Japan, he said.

Marketing magic

Johnson says sales promotion directors at the Idaho Potato Commission work with retailers to properly merchandise stores to maximize potato sales.

"We've seen all kinds of attempts at this over the years," he said. "Our promotion directors have the experience to walk into any retailer and help them achieve their targeted goals for the potato category. We look at each market individually and we have Nielsen data that allows us to look at sales trends."

IPC also hosts a merchandising contest during February in conjunction with Potato Lover's Month, which Johnson said is popular. IPC awards three grand prizes

"When the contest is judged and finalized, the Idaho Potato Commission will have awarded over \$150,000 in prizes to

POTATOES page 23



"If they get [the dietary classification for potatoes] wrong, not only does it misinform consumers about the nutrient value of potatoes, it can trickle down."

- Kam Quarles, National Potato Council

POTATOES from page 22

our front-line grocery workers," he said. "We love giving back to the front lines of our industry and showing our appreciation for the hard work they do."

Turner said, thanks to a Specialty Crop Block Grant, the Michigan Potato Industry Commission created a social media marketing campaign to reach Gen Z and millennials. This centered around pop star Taylor Swift's two-day Eras Tour stops in Detroit in June 2023.

"We had singing potatoes and potatoes singing her songs," she said. "We had graphics all around the area where the show was including, gas station ads and different things."

Turner said it's a good lesson for potato marketers trying to reach new or underutilized markets: Tap into what's going on in pop culture to help create buzz.

"When it comes to marketing, potatoes are fun," she said. "People are drawn to potatoes. So, as long as we can continue to get the information out about the nutritional value of potatoes, I think that's the low-hanging fruit for us right now." P



More than 650,000 Michigan residents were born outside the U.S., many of whom are from Asia or Latin America, where potatoes are not as available nor as widely utilized, says the Michigan Potato Industry Commission, which has started implementing more recipes - such as for Lebanese Garlic Potatoes — to address this need. Photo courtesy of Michigan Potato **Industry Commission**



National Potato Council report shows \$1B export potential with foreign market access

By Christina Herrick

Iready a significant contributor to the U.S. economy, the potato supply chain has plenty of growth potential

with expanded foreign market access.

That's according to the National Potato Council, which recently released its latest "Spud Nation" economic report on the eve of the 2024 Washington Summit. NPC said the study, authored by Michigan State University economists, shows the U.S. exports about 20% of potatoes grown in the country.

"Potato and potato products generated around \$4.78 billion in economic activity, and it supported approximately 34,000 U.S. jobs throughout the value chain," NPC incoming president Bob Mattive, a Colorado potato grower, said during the council's announcement. "That ... economic activity didn't just benefit potato growers, but also farm laborers, process workers, truck drivers, longshoremen and the communities that they live."

NPC estimates expanded foreign market access could add \$1 billion and 5,600 domestic jobs, an increase of 21%. Mattive said these markets include Canada, Japan, Mexico, South Korea and other East Asian and Middle Eastern markets.

"We all know that potatoes are America's favorite vegetable. Now we know that potatoes also hold the key to unlocking some further job growth and economic development," he said.

Current NPC President RJ Andrus, a potato grower from Idaho, said growers looking to export face tariffs, quotas and phytosanitary barriers. NPC members worked to help eliminate barriers and gain

Scan to view the NPC's "Spud Nation" report.



100% market access to Mexico two years ago, which benefits the country's potato industry, according to the council.

"As a result, we've seen exports increase by more than 100 million and we believe the market has additional room for growers," Andrus said during the announcement. "We're now working to achieve the

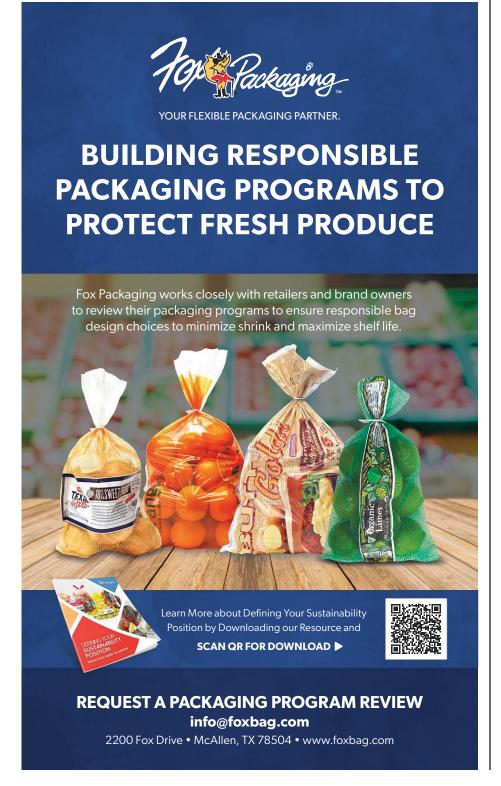
same access to Japan for U.S. potatoes, the market that's been shut out to us."

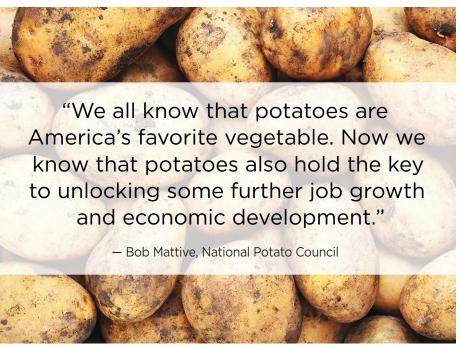
Andrus said NPC estimates market access in Japan would mean an additional \$150 to \$200 million.

NPC CEO Kam Quarles said the true opportunity for the potato industry in Japan is in fresh table stock potatoes. Quarles said while there is a limited domestic industry, the country does not import any fresh table stock potatoes.

Quarles said though the NPC and the USDA have worked to open market access, negotiations have stalled.

Last year's NPC "Spud Nation" report found the potato supply chain drove \$100.9 billion in U.S. economic activity, supported more than 714,000 jobs and contributed \$34 billion in wages in 2021.





In its latest report, the National Potato Council explores the economic potential of exports and expanded market access. Photo: Azazello, Adobe Stock

Potato and vegetable growers association names president

By The Packer Staff

he board of directors for the Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association has elected Charlie Mattek of J.W. Mattek & Sons in Deerbrook, Wis., as president for 2024. Mattek succeeds Randy Fleishauer of Plover River Farms in Stevens Point, Wis. The nonprofit organization also announced the following elections:

- Vice president John Bustamante,
 Wysocki Family of Companies, Bancroft,
 Wis.
- Secretary Alex Okray, Okray Family Farms, Plover, Wis.
- Treasurer Wendy Dykstra, Alsum Farms and Produce, Friesland, Wis.

Along with Fleishauer, the association's current board includes:

- Mike Baginski, Baginski Farms, Antigo, Wis.
- John Hopfensperger, Bushmans, Rosholt, Wis.
- Josh Knights, Heartland Farms, Hancock, Wis.
- \bullet J.D. Schroeder, Schroeder Bros. Farms, Antigo, Wis.

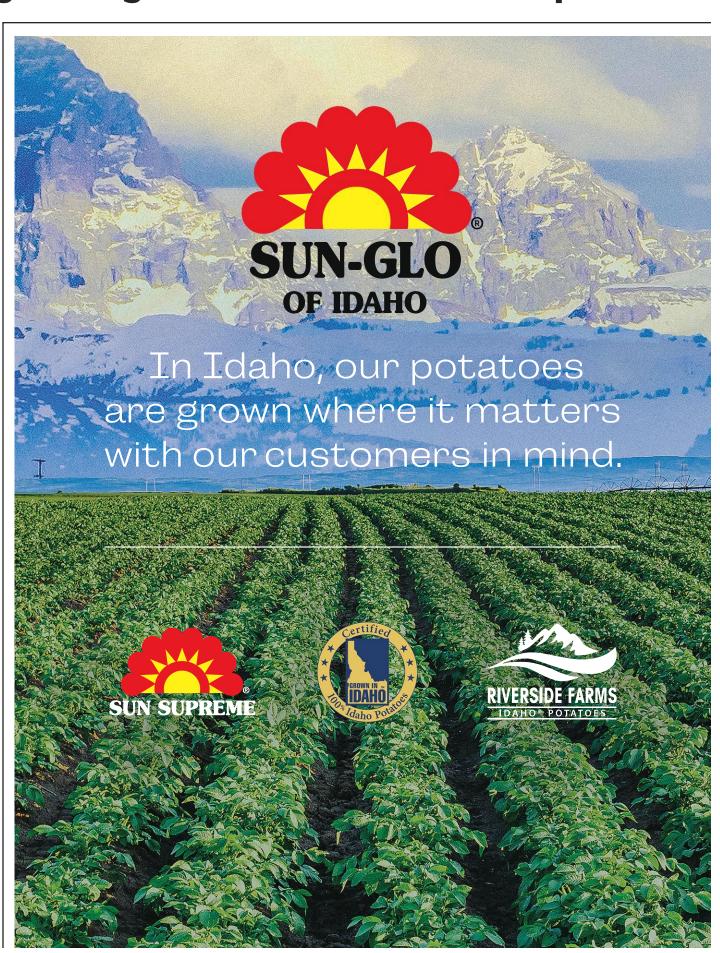
The organization's associate division board reelected Matt Selenske of Allied Cooperative's pest pros division as president. Ethan Olson of TH Agri-Chemicals was elected vice president of the board.

Additional associate division directors for 2024 include:

- Melissa Heise, Swiderski Equipment
- Brady Patoka, Jay-Mar
- Treasurer Paul Salm, BMO Harris Bank
- Scott Scheer, Vista Financial Services
- Secretary Morgan Smolarek, Mc-Cain Foods USA
- Sally Surprise, C&D Professional Insurance Services
- Brandon Taylor, Exit Realty

The Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association's board of directors elected Jeff Suchon of Bushmans' Riverside Ranch, president. Suchon succeeds Matt Mattek of J.W. Mattek & Sons. The board also elected Charlie Husnick of Baginski Farms as vice president, and Mitch Mattek of J.W. Mattek & Sons as secretary and treasurer.

In addition to the three board officers, two other board directors are Andy Schroeder of Schroeder Brothers Farms and Clover Spacek of Eagle River Seed. **P**



Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association presents member awards

By The Packer Staff

he Wisconsin Potato and Vegetable Growers Association recently honored Ron Krueger by inducting him into its Hall of Fame.

Kruger began his career in 1977 as the farm supervisor for the Frito-Lay Genetics research farm, in Starks, Wis., according to a news release. He then became the general manager for Felix Zeloski Farms, which became Eagle River Seed Farm in 2014. He retired from the company in 2022.

WPVGA said Kruger oversaw growing operations for 1,100 acres of early-generation certified seed potatoes, including numerous varieties, and other crops.

Kruger served as the organization's president in 2005 and served four three-year terms on WPVGA's board of directors. He was also the co-chair of the WPVGA Research Committee for over 20 years and served on the WPVGA Government Affairs and SpudPro committees, working on the SpudPro Committee from its inception until his retirement, the release said.

Kruger also sat on the board for the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association for two separate five-year terms, including serving four years as president.

WPVGA recognized him in 2006 and 2014 as its volunteer of the year, the Wisconsin Seed Potato Industry presented him with a leadership award in 2013, Frito Lay recognized him as seed supplier of the year, and the National Potato Council recognized him for his environmental stewardship, according to the release.

Other awards

The association also recognized Bill Page of Insight FS as its WPVGA Associate Division Business Person of the Year. Page started his career with Farm Bureau Cooperative in August 1977, the release said. The company then merged with Growmark and now Insight FS. He was recognized as the Certified Crop Advisor of the Year in 2020.

WPVGA named Randy Fleishauer, general manager of Plover River Farms Alliance in Stevens Point, Wis., as its Volunteer of the Year. He is the outgoing president of the Wisconsin Potato and



The Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association recently added Ron Krueger to its Hall of Fame for his lifetime of service to the state and potato industry. Photo courtesy of Wisconsin Potato & Vegetable Growers Association

WPVGA said Kruger oversaw growing operations for 1,100 acres of early-generation certified seed potatoes, including numerous varieties, and other crops.

Vegetable Growers Association board of directors, now completing his second term.

Fleishauer worked as a farm manager for 25 years for R.D. Offutt Co. in Wisconsin, Minnesota and South Dakota, the release said. He became general manager of Plover River Farms in 2017. He is the chairman of the WPVGA Vegetable and Processor Relations (Frozen) committees and a board member on the Research and Grower Ed Planning committees. He also serves on the National Potato Council Advisory Committee to the EPA and was appointed to the Wisconsin Ag Producers Security Council.

WPVGA recognized Dan Walsch of Plover River Farms with the President's Award, given to Walsch by Fleishauer.

The association named Charlie Husnick, a farm manager for Baginski Farms Inc., in Antigo, Wis., as its Young Grower of the Year. Husnick took part in the 2018 Industry Leadership Institute and was a 2019 graduate of the WPVGA Member Development Leadership Training Program. He currently serves on the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association Board and the United Potato Growers of Wisconsin Board, as well as a Wisconsin representative on Potatoes USA.

WPVGA recognized Brooke Babler as its Researcher of the Year. Babler is the associate program director of the Wisconsin Seed Potato Certification Program and previously served as certification and research manager, the release said.

Babler oversees seed potato certification in Wisconsin. Her research includes evaluating the performance of potato plantlets grown in potted, hydroponic and aeroponic systems. Winner of the Wisconsin Seed Potato Improvement Association Seed Industry Leadership Award in 2023, she is a potato expert with leadership in disease diagnostics and the certification process, according to the release.

The association honored Dick Pavelski with its Agri-Communicator Award for excellence in communication and outstanding service to the potato and vegetable industry. Pavelski is a fourth-generation farmer with roots dating back to 1873 when his great-grandfather, August Pavelski, emigrated from Poland, the release said. He is the founder of Heartland Farms in Hancock, Wis., one of the largest growers of chipping potatoes in the nation with over 20,000 acres of potatoes and vegetables.

A past president and Hall of Fame member of the WPVGA, Pavelski has served on the United States Potato Board and the National Potato Council and was a director of the National Fertilizer Solutions Association. He is a past president of the Wisconsin Fertilizer and Chemical Association as well as the Wisconsin Agri-Business Council. The Pavelski family founded Farming for the Future Foundation and incorporated it as a 501(c)3 nonprofit charitable organization in 2018.

WPVGA also recognized to Kevin Schleicher, director of sales for Wysocki Family Farms in Bancroft, Wis., and Paul Bethke, a member of the University of Wisconsin potato team in the department of horticulture with Special Industry Appreciate Awards. Bethke's research focuses on how different potato varieties respond to environmental conditions in the field and in storage, and how those responses influence potato tuber quality. Wysocki Family Farms raises 25,000 acres of chipping potatoes, process potatoes, fresh potatoes and more. He currently serves as the president of the Wisconsin Potato Coalition, which partners with the University of Wisconsin to improve the efficiency of seed potato production at the Starks Early Generation Seed Potato Farm in Rhinelander, Wis. Kevin also serves as a Wisconsin representative on the Potatoes USA board of directors and as vice chair on the Executive Committee of the Portage County Business Council. P

Commission's study shows \$2.5B impact of potatoes on Michigan's economy

By Christina Herrick

new report released by the Michigan Potato Industry Commission shows the economic benefits the Michigan potato industry has on the state's economy.

The commission, which shared the results of this report in a news release and webinar, said the state's potato industry contributes more than \$2.5 billion to the state's gross domestic product and supports 21,700 jobs in the state, generating around \$832 million in wages.

"In 2022 alone, this contribution, which stems from both direct and indirect economic activity, includes nearly \$1.5 billion in direct economic activity resulting from growing, processing wholesaling and retailing potatoes and potato products," Ryan Norton, chair of the Michigan Potato Industry Commission and farm manager at Walther Farms in Three Rivers, Mich., said during the webinar. "It also factors an ad-

webinar. "It also factors an additional \$1 billion in indirect activity from the food service industry and through the household consumption

of Michigan-grown potatoes."

The commission said the study found that pota-

Scan to view the report.



toes are the second-largest specialty crop grown in the state, adding that Michigan produces about 1.9 billion pounds of potatoes for seed, fresh, frozen, dehydrated and processing industries. More than 70% of potatoes grown in Michigan go to the chip industry.

The study says 1 in 4 bags of potato chips in the U.S. contains Michigan-grown potatoes.

"The sales of these potatoes generated

more than \$246 million [in 2022] alone.
This puts Michigan as the eighth-largest state in the

nation in terms of potato production and sixth in terms of sales," Phil Gusmano, vice president of purchasing of Detroit-based Better Made Snack Foods and commissioner on the Michigan Potato Industry Commission, said during the webinar.

Economists at Michigan State University authored the study. The report and its key takeaways can be found at MIPotato. com/NoSmallPotatoes.

Kelly Turner, executive director of the Michigan Potato Industry Commission, said the organization will use the survey results when state delegates travel to Washington, D.C., for the National Potato Council's advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill at the end of February.

Photo: Akmalism, Adobe Stock



BUSINESS BRIEFS



Idaho Falls, Idaho-based Eagle Eye Produce will focus on russet, red and gold potatoes from multiple growing areas this spring and summer, says Coleman Oswald, director of sales. "Storage volume is up year over year with added supplies available for new opportunities," he says. Photo courtesy of Eagle Eye Produce



Yellow potatoes go into storage at Idaho Falls, Idaho-based Eagle Eye Produce. Eagle Eye is investing in new technology, including robotics for sorting, says Coleman Oswald, director of sales. Photo courtesy of Eagle Eye Produce

By Tom Burfield

Eagle Eye invests in technology

Idaho Falls, Idaho-based Eagle Eye Produce is continuing to invest in new technology, adding more automated palletizers and artificial intelligence along with robotics for sorting, said Coleman Oswald, director of

"We are also making similar investments at the farm level to better handle the crops from planting through harvest," he said.

The company's focus this spring and summer will be russet, red and gold potatoes from multiple growing areas, he said.

Excellent volumes and availability are

"Storage volume is up year over year with added supplies available for new opportunities," Oswald said.

Sales also are up as more people eat potatoes, which is beneficial for growers at a time when potato supplies are elevated, he

"We'd love to see demand even stronger so that we can get prices up and help the grower returns," Oswald said.

Eagle Eye Produce exports a large amount of its potatoes, with shipments particularly strong to Mexico, he said.

Northland volume near average

Members of the East Grand Forks, Minn.-based Northland Potato Growers Association are shipping a near average-size crop of red and yellow potatoes this season, said Dave Moquist, chairman of the NPGA's advertising and promotions committee and an owner of O.C. Schulz & Sons Inc., Crystal, N.D.

This year's volume will be 1,480,000 hundredweight of potatoes, he said. The five-year average is about 1,550,000 hundredweight.

"Our Feb. 1 inventory was one of the lowest we've had over the last few years," he said. Red potato volume was significantly below the five-year average, while volume of yellow potatoes is above average.

"Over the last few years, the yellow demand has been dictating that growers plant a few more yellows and a few less reds," Moquist said.

The Red River Valley is one of the few dryland growing areas, which means that yields can vary each year, depending on growing conditions, he said. This year was a dry year.

Most growers harvest during September and the first part of October and ship out of storage until early June.



Wada Farms Marketing Group, Idaho Falls, Idaho, will have ample supplies of russet potatoes this spring and summer as well as red and yellow potatoes, says Eric Beck, marketing director. Photo courtesy of Wada Farms Marketing Group

Wada plans new offerings

Wada Farms Marketing Group, Idaho Falls, Idaho, plans to integrate some new brands and stock-keeping units into its lineup during the 2024 planting season in the fall, said Eric Beck, marketing director.

Meanwhile, the company will have adequate supplies this spring and summer to meet its customers' needs for Idaho potatoes, he said.

Supplies of russet potatoes are steady at Wada Farms, reds are starting to get a little tight, and yellows were slightly above where they needed to be in late February, Beck said, "But they're getting in check pretty quick."

"Quality looks great right now," he added.

Besides its domestic program, the company exports potatoes – usually consumer packs -- to Central America and to the Pacific Rim.

Consumers are buying potatoes at a steady pace, Beck said, because they understand the cost benefit of cooking at home and the value that potatoes provide.

"Even post-COVID, that trend remains relatively consistent," he said.

The biggest change is in the pack size.

Instead of buying a 5-pound bag, for example, consumers are buying a 3-pounder.

"Consumers are buying more what they plan on using and trying to reduce food waste,"

"With the cost of food relatively high, and with pressure from inflation, food waste is definitely in the forefront of people's minds." P

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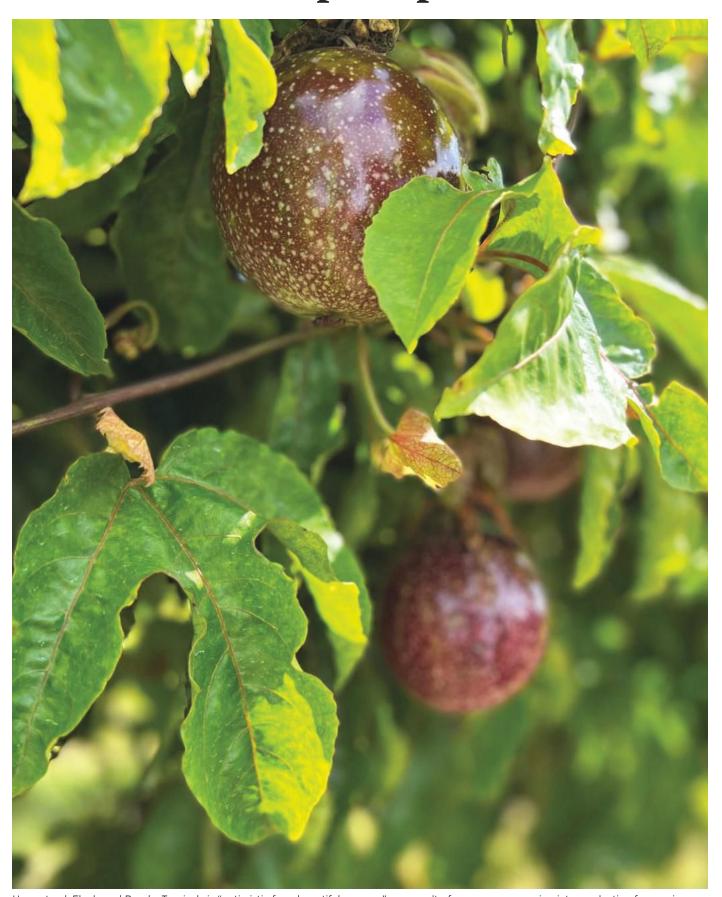
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FLORIDA SPRING PRODUCE

Growers anticipate productive season



Homestead, Fla.-based Brooks Tropicals is "optimistic for a bountiful summer" as a result of new acreage coming into production for passion fruit (shown here), avocados and carambola, says Peter Leiferman, vice president of sales and marketing. Photo courtesy of Brooks Tropicals Inc.

By Tom Burfield

lorida grower-shippers
are gearing up for another
productive season following an
unusually wet fall/winter deal.

Sweet corn volume at South Bay, Fla.based Branch — A Family of Farms typically heats up just after Easter, said owner Bret Bergman.

Although Branch ships year-round, movement spikes from late March through Labor Day, especially around the Memorial Day, Independence Day and Labor Day holidays, he said.

The company grows yellow, white and bicolor corn for customers mostly east of the Mississippi River.

Quality looks good this season, Bergman said, despite a "challenging winter."

"The prediction was cooler and wetter, and it seems like they were 100% accurate," he said.

At Palmetto, Fla.-based West Coast Tomato, company President Bob Spencer hopes the coming months will see a continuation of the momentum built up during the fall.

"The fall season was just a wonderful season," he said.

That's because less product than usual came out of Mexico, and fewer tomatoes were planted in Florida.

"The two things together made a wonderful pricing scenario," Spencer said.

The company, which packs round and roma tomatoes, will start up again in early March following a four-week break. Shipments will continue to June, when summer rains roll in.

Spencer was hopeful that spring will be drier than fall and winter, which were wetter than usual. Wet conditions can cause fungus issues and result in product being tossed out.

Peter Leiferman, vice president of sales and marketing for Homestead, Fla.-based Brooks Tropicals Inc., perceives the spring season as "the quiet before the storm" for Florida tropical produce.

Local SlimCado tropical avocados finished in January, and carambola and passion fruit wound down by late February.

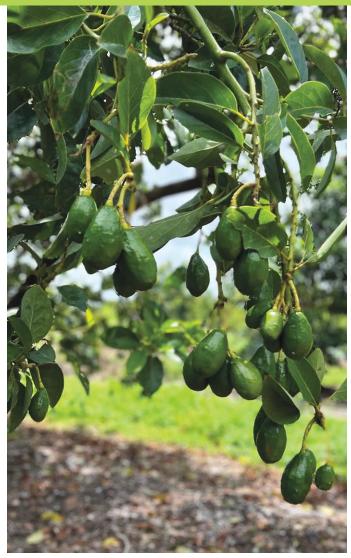
"Here at Brooks Tropicals, we are busy with annual maintenance on our hy-

PRODUCTIVE page 31

FLORIDA SPRING PRODUCE



South Bay, Fla.-based Branch — A Family of Farms ships sweet corn year-round, but movement tends to spike from late March through Labor Day, especially around the Memorial Day, July Fourth and Labor Day holidays, says owner Bret Bergman. Photo courtesy of Branch —



Whether imported or grown in Florida, SlimCado avocados are a popular item from Homestead, Fla.-based Brooks Tropicals Inc., says Peter Leiferman, vice president of sales and marketing. Photo courtesy of Brooks Tropicals Inc.

PRODUCTIVE from page 30

dro-cooler and facilities," he said. "In the groves, we are fertilizing and making sure our irrigation systems are all doing their jobs while we're in the dry season."

The company is importing SlimCado avocados from the Dominican Republic and dragon fruit from Ecuador. Caribbean Red Papaya from Guatemala and Brooks' Solo Papaya from Brazil are both in good supply, Leiferman said.

"Our Dominican Groovy Coconuts are popular for the spring feasting holidays such as Easter, Passover and Mother's Day," he said

Brooks Tropicals is "optimistic for a bountiful summer" as a result of new acreage coming into production for avocados, carambola and passion fruit, Leiferman said.

"Overall, we expect demand to continue to grow for each of our Florida tropical crops," he said.

Packaging, especially the sustainable kind, continues to be a prime concern for Florida grower-shippers.

Branch – A Family of Farms packs in reusable plastic containers and wood crates, but what it calls its white sustainer box seems to be garnering the most attention, Bergman said. It's made from No. 5 plastic, so it's recyclable.

"Some chains have realized that there's a recyclable benefit and an extraction value to it," he said.

The effects of inflation also are top of mind.

"We went through really intense inflation," Spencer of West Coast Tomato said. "It's not going up at the same pace, but it's not really going down."

Growers' break-even point is much higher than it was four years ago, he said.

To a certain degree, inflation affects everyone, Leiferman said, but he added that consumers continue to buy products from Brooks Tropicals.

"Our tropical produce offers things that consumers are looking for during any economic cycle," he said. "Nutritionally dense, high-quality fruits are always on the menu for shoppers." **P**



From left, Robert Alanis, farm manager, and Tony Jennison, production manager for West Coast Tomato, Palmetto, Fla., check out the company's tomato crop. President Bob Spencer says he hopes the coming months will see a continuation of the strong momentum built up during the fall. Photo courtesy of West Coast Tomato

Fresh From Florida touts state's produce

By Tom Burfield

lorida's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
has come up with a plethora of ways to promote the state's strawberries, sweet corn, watermelons, tomatoes, blueberries and a host of other fruits and vegetables through the Fresh From Florida retail promotion this spring, said, director of FDACS' marketing and development division.

The results of Fresh From Florida's efforts are seen in more than 12,000 stores operated by nearly 100 retailers in Florida and throughout the U.S., Canada, Central America and Europe, she said.

The Sunshine State's spring commodities are promoted in circular ads, in-store displays, samplings and more. This spring, Fresh From Florida retail promotions will also include grocery cart advertisements, floor graphics, advertising on cash back apps Ibotta and

Checkout 51, and grocery delivery services such as Instacart, Amazon Fresh and Kroger Delivery.

To mark its first year as a Fresh From Florida partner, Kroger Delivery customers will receive a Fresh From Florida insert in delivery bags and emails featuring Fresh

From Florida commodities, McKinley said.

Fresh From Florida also includes a consumer marketing campaign that encourages shoppers to look for the sunny Fresh From Florida logo.

"The advertising campaign includes print, radio, TV, digital and social media ads," she said.

The Fresh From Florida broadcast TV spot

"Sunshine Delivery" – airs in all major Florida
markets and on streaming platforms, and Fresh
From Florida radio spots air on terrestrial and
streaming radio with the message: "Fresh From
Florida – There's Sunshine in Every Bite."

"With nearly 850,000 social media followers, the Fresh From Florida brand delivers seasonal content and engages shoppers during peak season with recipes, culinary tips and farmer videos," McKinley said.

For more information on sourcing Florida produce or partnering with Fresh From Florida, contact RetailMKT@FDACS.gov. **P**



\$mith's Farm cultivates a legacy of freshness in the fertile lands of Hastings, FL. With a steadfast commitment to delivering quality broccoli and cauliflower, our winter growing season is more than a cycle – it is a promise of year-round supply right from the East Coast. Our strategic location in Florida's agricultural heartland provides our customers with a reliable alternative to West Coast and Mexican produce, ensuring consistent, fresh, and high-quality produce without the extra miles.

Smith's Farm, a name synonymous with integrity and family heritage, is owned and operated by the 5th and 6th generations of the Smith family, represented by the Stag Brand. Our vision is to grow, produce, and cultivate relationships built on trust and quality. In an industry where competition is ripe and Mexican imports often challenge market standards, we stand firm in our practices, delivering produce that meets and exceeds expectations. Our dedication to playing by the rules shines through in the unparalleled quality of our broccoli and cauliflower.

In a time where food safety and transparency are not just expected but demanded, Smith's Farm leads with innovation and integrity. Recognizing the critical role of transparency in today's food supply, we ensure that every broccoli and cauliflower head from our fields is a testament to our commitment to consumers well-being.

"The integrity of Smith's Farm is reflected in every transaction. We are not just selling vegetables; we are offering a piece of our family's legacy. We are committed



SMITH'S FAR

PREMIUM PRODUCE

CUSTOMERS LOVE

From left to right: Lance Smith, Tara Smith Vighetti Zach Smith, Emily Smith

to delivering an exceptional experience, where your satisfaction is our top priority. With our unwavering dedication to building strong and lasting relationships, you can trust

us to go above and beyond to meet your needs," says Tara Smith-Vighetti, Partner.

Celebrating recent accolades of two perfect food safety audit scores, we not only comply with industry standards—we set them. Our technological advancements provide unparalleled insight into our products' journey from farm to table, reinforcing the credibility and trust in the Stag Brand.
As trends shift and consumers become more informed, they seek brands that offer more than produce; they seek a promise of integrity and security. Smith's Farm delivers on this promise with every harvest, ensuring our customers receive only the safest, highest-quality vegetables. It is not just about meeting expectations—it is about exceeding them in every conceivable way.
"At Smith's Farm, we understand that

excellence in agriculture is not just about the final product but the journey from seed to delivery. We prioritize education and research,

in addition to our sustainable farming and advanced technology investments.

This holistic approach ensures that every crown symbolizes quality and reflects our dedication to responsible and advanced agriculture," says Zach Smith, Partner

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BUSINESS BRIEFS

By Tom Burfield

Florida Classic tells lineup

Peaches and blueberries will be available from Florida Classic Growers, Dundee, Fla., in late March or early April, said Derek Rodgers, director of sales and marketing. The company will have valencia oranges out of storage through June and will ship Georgia grapefruit until the third week of March.

Valencia volume should be up compared to last year, which suffered the effects of a hurricane, he said.

Despite its relatively short season, Florida is typically the first state to offer summer peaches.

J&C to sample Fruitavore

tropical fruit jerky called Fruitavore at booth 715 at the Southeast Produce Council Southern Exposure Conference in Tampa, Fla., March 7-9, said Denise Gomez, marketing manager.

Miami-based J&C Tropicals plans to sample its new

Fruitavore is manufactured in Ecuador with organic white and yellow dragon fruit, papaya, mango and strawberries, and it will be sold in 1.75-ounce packages containing five sticks of jerky. The product will be formally launched this summer, Gomez said.

J&C Tropicals also plans to bring back its pepino melons that were introduced last year. They're green, about the size of guava and have a "bitter taste but a bit of

Passion fruit is among the products Miami-based J&C Tropicals will offer this spring, says Denise Gomez, marketing manager. Photo courtesy of J&C Tropicals

sweetness to them" as they ripen, she said.

The company also will focus on red and yellow dragon fruit, avocados, mangoes, passion fruit, guava, mamey, lychees and star fruit this spring.

Pioneers Growers expands

Belle Glade, Fla.-based Pioneer Growers has undergone significant growth and expansion over the past couple of years and made some major personnel changes, said Stewart Mann, vice president and general manager.

Geoff Taft, who has been with the company for more than 20 years, has been named director of sales; and Nick Caruso, Christa Stein and Derek Hall have joined the firm's sales team. Morgan Pearce has been named to the sales/logistics department, and Mike Owens, a 20-year produce industry veteran, has been named director of retail and key partnerships.

Pioneer Growers also has added growers and expanded its product offerings, Mann said.

The company is a leader in sweet corn, green beans, cabbage and radishes, and with the addition of Belle Glade-based Growers Management Inc., the company has added leafy greens, including romaine, escarole, endive, red and green leaf lettuce, Boston/Bibb, cilantro and parsley.

The firm also has added broccoli and bell peppers to its list of commodities and expanded its growing regions to Indiana, North Carolina, New York Honduras and Ecuador, Mann said.



General manager Eddie Caram expects good quality this year on red Florida guava and other tropical items from Princeton, Fla.-based New Limeco. Photo courtesy of New Limeco

New Limeco plans Florida season

Princeton, Fla.-based New Limeco will kick off its Florida season with red guavas, carambola and some Florida mangoes, said Eddie Caram, general manager. Most products will start shipping in late April or early May.

The company also will offer imported limes, avocados and papayas during the spring. Quality should be good following a mild winter, he said. And the company's volume should be up slightly.



Broccoli is among the main products offered by Smith's Farm, which is based in Presque Isle, Maine, with a secondary operation in Hastings, Fla., says Megan Adams, administrative director. Photos courtesy of Smith's Farm



Jena Lee Stansell

Smith's Farm tweaks branding

Smith's Farm, based in Presque Isle, Maine, with a secondary operation in Hastings, Fla., has tweaked its branding with new cello packaging on its cauliflower and new stickers on its wrapped broccoli, said Megan Adams, administrative director.

The company also has added Jena Lee Stansell, most recently with Myrick Produce, Plant City, Fla., to its sales staff.

Smith's Farm volume should be up slightly this year, Adams said, with broccoli, cauliflower and potatoes as the firm's main products. **P**

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BANANA MARKETING

Banana imports rise in volume and value

By Tom Karst

anana import volume and value were up in 2023, according to USDA trade numbers. At \$2.04 billion, the U.S. import value of bananas in 2023 was up

4% from 2022, up 9% from 2021 and up 8% from 2020.

U.S. import volume of bananas was 5.08 million metric tons in 2023, up 2% from 4.99 million metric tons in 2022. The per metric ton value of banana imports in 2023 was \$532.80, up 7% from 2022 and up

Guatemala, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Colombia and Mexico were the top global suppliers to the U.S. market, according to USDA numbers. By country, 2023 U.S. import value numbers — shown with percent change from 2022 — were:

- **World total** \$2.04 billion, up 4%.
- **Guatemala** \$948.9 million, up 2%.
- **Costa Rica** \$432 million, up 21%.
- Honduras \$228.3 million, down 4%.
- **Ecuador** \$167.9 million, up 2%.
- **Colombia** \$123.9 million, up 6%.
- **Mexico** \$106.1 million, down 13%.
- **Panama** \$31.1 million, up 68%.

Banana retail per capita availability was 26.9 pounds in 2021, down 1% from 2020 and down 2%. Retail per capita availability data for 2011 to 2021 was:

- **2011** 25.5 pounds.
- **2012** 26.9 pounds.
- **2013** 28 pounds.
- **2014** 27.9 pounds.
- **2015** 27.9 pounds.
- **2016** 27.4 pounds. • **2017** — 28.6 pounds.
- **2018** 28.3 pounds.
- **2019** 27.4 pounds.

- **2020** 27.2 pounds. • **2021** — 26.9 pounds.

The following are U.S. average banana prices per carton at U.S. terminal markets for the past year, according to the USDA:

- **1/7/23** \$21.57.
- **2/4/23** \$21.81.
- **3/4/23** \$22.67.
- **4/1/23** \$22.59.
- **5/6/23** \$22.15.
- **6/3/23** \$21.87. • **7/1/23** — \$21.80.
- **8/5/23** \$21.84.
- **9/9/23** \$21.92.
- 10/07/23 \$21.64.
- **11/04/23** \$21.90.
- **12/02/23** \$22.30.
- 1/6/24 \$22.23. P

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Organic imports rise in 2023

By Tom Karst

mports of organic bananas increased 10% in 2023, according to trade numbers from the USDA.

The value of U.S. organic banana imports totaled \$342.2 million in 2023, up 10% from \$311.4 million in 2022 and up 6% from 2021.

Ecuador is by far the leading supplier of organic bananas to the U.S., accounting for 50% of total U.S. organic banana value in 2023. That number is up from a 38% share in 2022 and up from a 37% share in 2021.

Mexico was ranked second as a supplier of organic bananas to the U.S. in 2023, accounting for 23% of the total U.S. organic banana value.

Colombia was next in imports, with 22% of U.S. organic banana value in 2023, with Peru accounting for 5%, according to USDA trade numbers.

The USDA reported organic banana import value from these countries below in 2023, listed with the percent change compared with 2022:

- **Ecuador** \$170.1 million, up 45%.
- **Mexico** \$77.3 million, down 12%.
- Colombia \$74.2 million, down 2%.
- **Peru** \$17.9 million, down 35%.
- Dominican Republic \$1.98 million, down 26%.
- **Guatemala** \$512,000, up 232%.
- Costa Rica \$244,000, up 28%. **P**



Equifruit nabs consumer, retail attention

By Tom Karst

quifruit did not become a
North American market leader for Fairtrade-certified bananas by
being boringly conventional.

"Our marketing objective is to be impossible to ignore," said Kim Chackal, director of sales and marketing for Montreal-based Equifruit. "Equifruit packaging will make you do a double-take — our merchandising tools are bright and effective at communicating our 100% Fairtrade sourcing promise, and our social media piggybacks off whatever is trending in pop culture and pulls your attention back to the importance of paying banana farmers fairly."

Over the past six years, Chackal said Fairtrade banana volumes have increased by 466% in Canada and 15% in the U.S.

"Demand for Equifruit Fairtrade bananas continues to grow and we have the supply to match," she said. "We are in Q1 of our fiscal year and already hit over 50% of our sales targets. The future is looking bright for Equifruit banana farmers."

Chackal said Equifruit organic Fairtrade bananas just launched in Walmart Canada in select provinces. The company also supplies its organic bananas in two-thirds of Canadian Costco Warehouses as well as in select warehouses in the New York City area, she said.

"We've had longstanding partnerships with Canadian customers like Sobeys, Longo's and Farm Boy as well as a ton of small chains and independent stores," Chackal said. "Our retail and distribution partners are such champions of the program."

Chackal said Equifruit's main marketing campaign this year is to give its audience tools to become an "official Banana Badass."

"We call ourselves and those in our supply chain #BananaBadasses because we're making equitable supply chains as loved and



Michael Jackson is shown getting tattooed alongside Patrick Kelly of The Produce Industry Podcast. Photo courtesy of Equifruit

appetizing as pop culture," she said.

"We developed a Banana Badass Starter Kit which was distributed at the Organic Produce Summit and International Fresh Produce Association Global Show," she continued. "We also set up a Banana Badass Tattoo HQ at the IFPA Global Show where folks could get a Banana Badass tattoo and level up their lanyard with a Banana Badass ribbon. In 2024, we are going to take it one

step further and diagnose what type of Banana Badass you are."

Beyond the fun with marketing, Chackal said Equifruit's 100% Fairtrade brand considers sustainability at the core of its offering.

Chackal said that Equifruit has been on *The Globe & Mail's* Top Growing Companies in Canada list for the last two years. The company has expanded its business across Canada and into the U.S., and its leaders are

optimistic about the future, she said.

Fairtrade International recently released a GlobeScan study indicating that U.S. consumers are willing to pay 60 cents more per pound for Fairtrade bananas.

"With the momentum we see in Canada and the growing momentum in the U.S., the time is ripe to rethink your banana strategy and to officially become a Banana Badass," she said. **P**



MEXICAN MANGOES

Mexican mangoes dominate U.S. supply

By Tom Karst

he U.S. imports virtually all its fresh mango supply, and both imports and per capita consumption are growing over time, according to USDA numbers.

Per capita retail availability of fresh mangoes grew from 2.1 pounds in 2010 to 3.5 pounds in 2021, according to the USDA, more than double the retail per capita availability of 1.7 pounds in 2000.

Mexico was by far the leading mango supplier to the U.S. in 2023. U.S. imports of Mexican mangoes were valued at \$476.3 million in 2023, which accounted for 63% of the total U.S. mango import value that year.

Following Mexico, leading suppliers of mangoes to the U.S. in 2023 were Peru (19% of total import value), Brazil (8%) and Ecuador (4%).



U.S. imports of Mexican mangoes were valued at \$476.3 million in 2023, which accounted for 63% of the total U.S. mango import value that year. Photo: Alexander Ruiz, Adobe Stock

U.S. imports of Mexican mangoes have steadily increased in value, up from \$191 million in 2010 to \$476 million in 2023.

By volume, Mexican mangoes accounted for 66% of total U.S. import mango volume in 2023.

U.S. imports of Mexican mangoes totaled 419,930 metric tons in 2023, the USDA said. By month, U.S. imports of Mexican mangoes peaked in May, topping 71,600 metric tons.

Mexican mango shipments were strongest from March through September, peaking from April through August.

By month, Mexico's share of U.S. mango 2023 import volume was:

- January 17%.
- $\bullet \ {\bf February} 26\%.$
- March 64%.
- April 74%.
- $\bullet \ {\rm May} 81\%.$
- June 91%.
- July 95%.
- August 97%.
- $\bullet \ \, \mathbf{September} 66\%.$
- October -17%.
- November -15%.
- December -16%. P

Retailers have tools to boost mango sales

By Tom Karst

etailers have several winning strategies to sell more mangoes, says Dan Spellman, director of marketing of the National Mango Board.

Spellman said one winning approach is to build eye-catching displays.

Retailers can create visually appealing displays that highlight the vibrant colors of mangoes, he said, and use attractive signage and well-designed arrangements to draw customers' attention.

In terms of cross-promotions, retailers can pair mangoes with complementary products, such as tropical fruits, salads or beverages.

"This can encourage customers to purchase mangoes as part of a larger meal or snack idea," he said.

Spellman said retailers can use educational materials to provide information about the different varieties of mangoes, their flavors, and nutritional benefits. Retailers also can leverage holidays and special occasions to create themed promotions, he said.



Retailers have numerous strategies to boost mango sales. Photo courtesy of National Mango

"For example, during the summer months (April to August), promote mangoes as a refreshing and healthy option for barbecues, picnics, and outdoor activities," Spellman said.

Showcasing recipes is another way for retailers to highlight mangoes to shoppers, he said. Recipes could include smoothies, salsas, desserts or salads. Providing recipe cards or

digital content can inspire customers to try new ways of enjoying mangoes, he said.

In addition, social media campaigns from retailers can run promotions, share recipes, and engage with customers.

Retailers also can encourage them to share their mango creations, creating a sense of community around the product.

Holiday promotions

For themed opportunities during holidays from April to August, the National Mango Board focuses on:

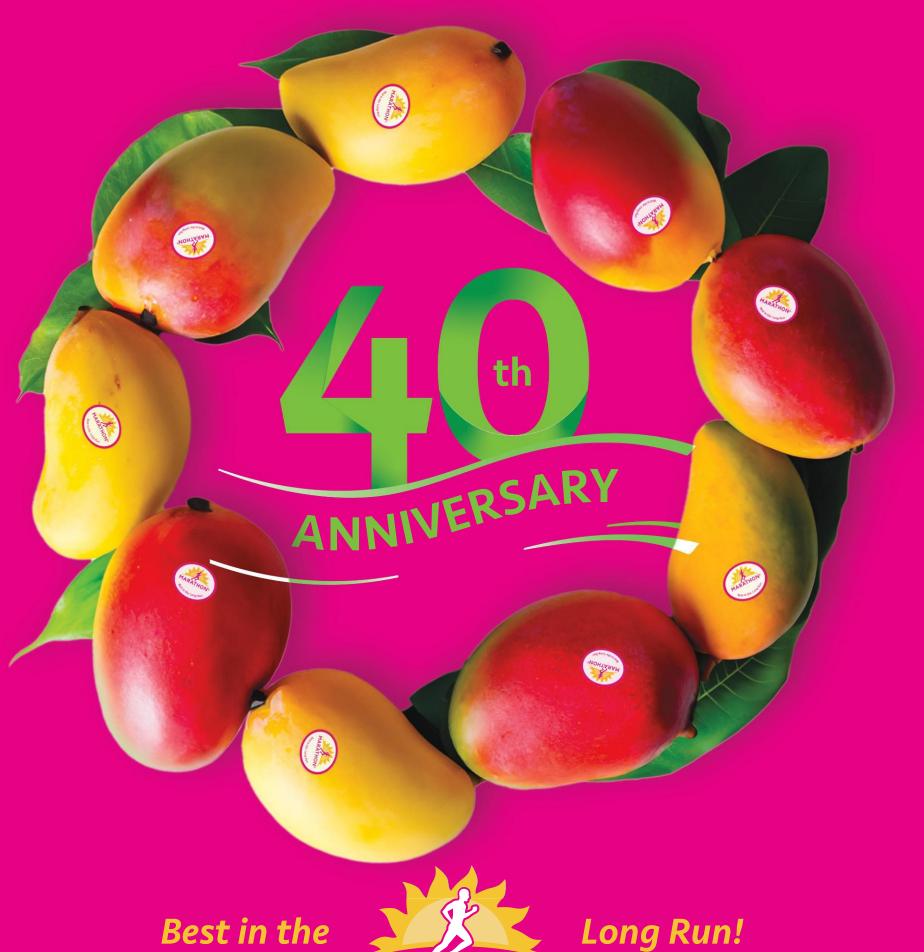
• Cinco de Mayo (May 5) — Retailers should promote mangoes as a key ingredient in Mexican dishes or beverages, such as mango salsa or margaritas, Spellman said.

• Memorial Day (Last Monday in May)

 Retailers can emphasize mangoes as a healthy and refreshing addition to Memorial Day picnics and barbecues, he said.

- Independence Day (July 4) Retailers can create red, white and blue-themed displays featuring mangoes alongside other patriotic foods, Spellman said.
- Labor Day (First Monday in September) — Retailers can position mangoes as a versatile and easy-to-prepare ingredient for end-of-summer gatherings.

"The National Mango Board is aligning mango promotions with holidays and seasonal themes, retailers can capitalize on consumer interest and boost sales," Spellman said. **P**





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Ciruli Bros. touts its Champagne mangoes for March promotion

By Tom Karst

iruli Bros. LLC says March is a great month for the retail promotion of its Champagne mangoes.

Chris Ciruli, chief operating officer of the Rio Rico, Ariz.-based company, said there is expected to be limited round mango production available, which will allow a transition to Champagne mangoes (ataulfo variety) from the start of March through Cinco de Mayo.

"We expect consistent volume and consistent pricing for promotions during this period," he said.

"We have confidence in supplies for Champagne mangoes during the months to come," Ciruli added. "We do not anticipate an opportunity to promote round varieties until the end of April or May. There are too many inconsistencies in supply forecasts and sizing to truly understand the state of the crop."

The 2024 mango season is slated to be a near carbon copy of 2023, he said.

"The early bloom sets have more fruit than last year," he said. "This is because there was more rain during the fall months, which contributed to an abundance of crop from Chiapas and Michoacán [in Mexico]."

While it is too early to tell what the production will be in the northern states, Ciruli said the marketer anticipates that with good weather in Michoacán, the company can exceed its 2023 volume of Mexican mangoes.

"It is worth noting that the middle states which are in transition between June through August have ample bloom which has yet to set, therefore making volume projections difficult at this time," he said.



Chris Ciruli, chief operating officer of the Rio Rico, Ariz.-based company, said there is expected to be limited round mango production available, which will allow a transition to Champagne mangoes (ataulfo variety) from the start of March through Cinco de Mayo. Photo: courtesy of

Options

Ciruli Bros. offers its customers different packaging options for mangoes, all of which are designed with the consumer in mind. Ciruli said.

The options include small display-ready boxes, clamshells and a traditional 4-kilogram (around 8.8 pounds) box. All yellow mangoes are sold in Ciruli Bros.' Champagne mango label, and the rounds are marketed in the Super Mango, Mr. Mango, and Señor Mango brands.

"Our marketing efforts with retail partners are based on driving volume with promotions that start early and often," Ciruli said. "We encourage larger displays for improved visibility and traffic, and fruit that is a deep, bright yellow, mature and extremely sweet. This is important for the consumer. We want people to have a great experience eating our mangoes and encourage repeat buys more often."

Eating quality is expected to be exceptional in March, he said. Ciruli Bros.

is encouraging its retail partners to cut and sample the Champagne mangoes for customers to try.

Growth

The mango business continues to grow, Ciruli said.

"We have continued to hit double-digit growth in volume, year after year, with our Champagne mango program," he said. "Our round program has also grown."

Ciruli said that retail chains that have learned how to sell Champagne mangoes continue to see growth.

"We enjoy helping them plan for more," he said. "There are still a number of retailers who mainly carry round mangoes, however, and that is the growth opportunity we see."

With different mango varieties available at different times of the year, he said Ciruli Bros. looks forward to working with retailers to help them grow mango category sales. **P**



Urapa Produce says it is dedicated to offering a variety of mango types to cater to diverse consumer preferences. Photo: Courtesy of Urapa Produce

Urapa Produce launches 2024 Mexican mango season

By The Packer Staff

exican mango grower-shipper Urapa Produce says its mango season is underway.

Starting in the Chiapas region of Mexico, Urapa's operations will progressively advance through the coastal producing regions, ensuring a steady supply of premium mangoes, according to a news release. The company said the strategic approach capitalizes on peak harvest times across different areas.

Urapa also is highlighting its vertical integration from its groves to its new distribution center — BDS Cold Storage — in South Texas, the release said.

"Our vertical integration is a key component of our strategy to deliver the best possible product to our customers," Tony Godinez, managing partner of Urapa Produce, said in the release. "It allows us to control every aspect of the supply chain, from the moment our mangoes are harvested until they reach our customers, ensuring unparalleled freshness and quality."

In addition to a focus on supply chain excellence, Urapa said it is dedicated to offering a variety of mango types to cater to diverse consumer preferences. The company's selection ranges from ataulfo "honey" mangoes to the tommy akins variety, continuing through the season with hadens, kents and keitts, the release said.

As Mexico continues to be a major player in the mango market, Urapa said it is poised to contribute significantly to the industry's growth. **P**

Mangoes: Average shipping point prices (average per carton, all origins)

11/4/23	\$13.52	12/16/23	\$12.01	1/27/24	\$14.61
11/11/23	\$12.33	12/23/23	\$12.13	2/3/24	\$15.05
11/18/23	\$11.36	12/30/23	\$12.35	2/10/24	\$15.43
11/25/23	\$9.89	01/6/24	\$12.75	2/17/24	\$15.79
12/2/23	\$10.21	1/13/24	\$13.57		
12/9/23	\$11.14	1/20/24	\$14.42	Source: LISDA	



Photo: volff, Adobe Stock



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Look for our other Ciruli Brothers™ mango brands

Super Mango. Mr. Mango. Señor Mango.

Oishii raises \$134M in Series B funding

By Aaron Gonzalez

ertical indoor strawberry grower Oishii says it has closed on \$134 million in Series B funding.

Oishii says the funds are expected to accelerate its growth. The brand will open a solar-powered facility, expand distribution to new markets and continue to invest in advanced robotics and energy-saving innovations, according to a news release.

Led by Japan's telecommunication firm NTT, the round also attracted a diverse group of investors with expertise in food tech, sustainable agriculture and automation, the release said.

"We founded Oishii to solve some of the biggest food supply issues our world faces today — but to do so deliciously," Hiroki Koga, CEO and co-founder of Oishii, said in the release. "The time is now to take our technology from a promise of a better tomorrow to a proven reality — making good on the movement my predecessors in Japan started a decade ago. This capital will help us pave the way for mainstream adoption of vertical farming in the U.S., and we're grateful to welcome many new partners to the Oishii family who share our vision of a sweeter future."

The company says it delivers a highly differentiated product — from the Omakase Berry to the flagship Koyo Berry and its new Rubī Tomato. Oishii plans to unveil another type of berry later this year, according to the release.



Vertical indoor strawberry grower Oishii says it has closed on \$134 million in Series B funding, which is expected to accelerate its growth. The brand will open a solar-powered facility, expand distribution to new markets and continue to invest in advanced robotics and energy-saving innovations. Pictured is Hiroki Koga, Oishii CEO and co-founder. Photo courtesy of Oishii

"We founded Oishii to solve some of the biggest food supply issues our world faces today — but to do so deliciously."

- Hiroki Koga, CEO and co-founder of Oishii

Oishii says a commitment to efficiency is one of many reasons for its success. Major breakthroughs include introducing harvesting robots developed in partnership with investor Yaskawa, as well as optimizing the artificial intelligence models that power bee pollination, environmental

controls and farm output to grow more with less energy and water, the release said.

"While many in the industry prioritize short crop cycles and unrelenting expansion, Oishii has bucked all trends by emphasizing taste over timelines and profitability over proliferation," Akira Shimada, president and CEO of NTT, said in a news release. "Oishii is a leading company with a great vision, a strategic approach, and one-of-a-kind technology, and has succeeded in what was previously considered difficult to achieve. We are confident that Oishii will be a great partner to take on the challenges for the future of agriculture."

As the only U.S. vertical farm to sell strawberries year-round, Oishii says it marries nature, technology and farming techniques perfected for decades in Japan to grow its fruit. Grown pesticide-free, every Oishii product bears the Non-GMO Project Verified seal and is always in season.

Oishii introduced its first strawberry, the Omakase Berry, in 2018, which caught the attention of Michelin-starred chefs, tastemakers and consumers for its sweetness, aroma and creamy texture, the release said. In February 2023, the company unveiled its second strawberry, the Koyo Berry, known for its refreshing sweetness and balanced acidity. Two months ago, Oishii revealed the jewel-like Rubī Tomato.

Oishii's funding news comes on the heels of the brand's expansion across the Northeast. In June 2023, Oishii launched its Koyo Berry in the Washington, D.C., area before bringing the fruit to Maryland, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Jersey, the release said. Oishii products are available at Whole Foods Market, FreshDirect and in a number of specialty grocers; each tray retails between \$10-\$15.

EPC annual gala to honor former president Marianne Santo

By Jennifer Strailey

he Eastern Produce Council is set to honor former president Marianne Santo at the John McAleavey Annual Gala on April 6. Santo, a three-time EPC president and senior category manager of produce and floral at Wakefern Food Corp., died Sept. 24, 2023. She was 61.

Slated to take place at The Westmount Country Club in Woodland Park, N.J., EPC's 2024 gala will include a cocktail hour, dinner buffet, a Jersey Boys Act, DJ and more, according to a news release.

Philanthropic throughout her career



Marianne Santo

and her life, Santo was passionate about supporting women and people in need, the release said. In this spirit, the EPC will collaborate with Dress Express Boutique, a New Jersey nonprofit organiza-

tion founded with the mission to support young women.

At the event, people are invited to bring new or gently worn dresses of all types, styles and sizes, which will be donated to Dress Express Boutique. The nonprofit will then host an event featuring the dresses, the proceeds from which will go to the Mercy Girl Effect, an organization that recognizes, funds and promotes causes impacting young women around the globe, with special focus on education and building leadership, the release said.

Monetary donations are also greatly appreciated, and checks can be made payable to Sisters of Mercy, says the EPC. In the memo include, "Dress Express Boutique/MGE." Donation checks can be brought to the gala event or mailed to Eastern Produce Council, P.O. Box 897, New Providence, NJ 07974.

This annual event, now in its 57th year, is the main fundraising effort of the EPC, enabling the council to continue to support worthy causes and organizations in the produce industry and its community, the release said.

McAleavey passionately served the council as its executive director for 25 years, says EPC. Following his death in 2015, the annual gala event was named in his memory.

To learn more about tickets, sponsorships and ad support for this event, visit the EPC website, email easternproducecouncil@gmail.com or call 908-723-0645. **P**



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